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PARENTS AND SCHOOLS WORKING TOGETHER: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF PARENT-SCHOOL COLLABORATION

BY

MARIANNE C. GAREAU

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Education
in
Counselling Psychology.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

EDMONTON, ALBERTA
FALL, 1994

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FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled

PARENTS AND SCHOOLS WORKING TOGETHER:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF PARENT-SCHOOL COLLABORATION

submitted by **Marianne C. Gareau** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education in Counselling Psychology.

Don Sawatzky, Supervisor

Mary Ann Bibby

Linda LaRocque

Fern Snart

Date: Aug. 31, 1994

ABSTRACT

There is high agreement that school and family relationships are important for schools, children, and families. However, the term "parent-school collaboration" is a relatively recent one in education, reflecting a general societal trend towards increased participation of parents in the educational decision-making process. The purpose of this research was to study how people currently describe and understand the concept of parent-school collaboration. The study focused on the perceptions of parents and educators of elementary school children (ages 5-11).

In-depth interviews were conducted with five participants: a school principal, a school counsellor, a teacher, and two parents. Transcriptions of the interviews were broken down into meaning units, which were then paraphrased and categorized into descriptive units, and finally a higher order clustering of themes was carried out. The analyses were individually verified with each participant.

Nine themes emerged. Two of these themes were related to the importance of parent-school collaboration (children live in the two worlds of home and school, and changes in society); the other seven themes corresponded to important characteristics of parent-school collaboration (communication, trust/openness/honesty, positive/caring attitudes, personal connections, being equals, power/conflict, and school-wide commitment). Issues surrounding these themes and suggestions for implementing parent-school collaboration are discussed. Suggestions follow for future research in the area.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Overview to the Study

The purpose of this investigation was to study how a school principal, a school counsellor, a teacher, and two parents describe and understand the concept of parent-school collaboration. All of the participants, from a Catholic school in a suburb of a major city in Alberta, participated in face-to-face, in-depth interviews with the researcher. The participants' stories, and the interpretations of their thoughts, form the basis of this thesis.

The main purpose of the study was to understand how each of the participants in the study view parent-school collaboration, how it does or does not come about, and what kinds of things can be done to promote meaningful collaboration between parents and schools.

I have deliberately chosen to talk about **parent-school** rather than **school-family** collaboration. Children are clearly the focus of, and the reason for, the relationship between the school and the home; however, since I think of children as inhabiting the two worlds of family and school, it is my intention to focus this research on the adults (i.e., parents and educators), and the nature of their relationships. This analysis focuses on parents and educators of elementary school children (ages 5-11), since these beginning stages seem most important in shaping the perspectives of parents in the years that follow (Lightfoot, 1978). Furthermore, children of this age have a greater dependence on the adults around them than do children in secondary schools.

General Background on Parent-School Collaboration

There is high agreement that school and family connections are important for schools, children, and families (Epstein, 1992; Henderson, 1987). Rich (1988) states:

> New practices must follow current research. There is a convergence today of forces and needs about families and schools. Teachers are realizing more than ever that they must work in partnership with parents and the community. A growing research base is affirming the impact of families as educators of their children. (p. 92)

Although much has been written about the importance of parents and schools working well together, until quite recently, there has been very little research aimed at understanding what parents and educators actually mean when they speak about collaboration, and whether collaboration has different meanings for parents than it does for educators. Most of the literature on this topic has consisted of attempts to provide assistance, either to educators on how to "work with" parents, (e.g., Baskwill, 1989; Hart, 1988; Henderson et al, 1986) or to parents on how to "work with" the school (Botrie & Wenger, 1992). This literature is largely of a promotional or critical nature, consisting mainly of descriptions and recommendations. There have also been some surveys that have been undertaken to determine parent and teacher satisfaction in this area, but these are largely of a quantitative nature. There appears to be little research on this subject in which interviewing is an important element of the methodology.

The relationship between schools and parents is a factor widely discussed by educators and psychologists as important in the effectiveness of educational programs for children. However, as Sarah Lightfoot points out in her 1978 book, Worlds Apart, most studies that have sought to analyze the "intersections" between families and schools have looked at how these systems are organized and constructed, but not with their relatedness to one another. Furthermore, these

studies have not focused on the dynamics of the intersection between families and schools **from the point of view of the various participants** (Henderson et al, 1986). As Lightfoot (1978) explains, researchers have also tended to look at the quality of parent-school contact only when they are analyzing the origins of pathology and deviance in children. My goal is to focus on the points of view of parents and educators, and to do so in a context that is not necessarily related to difficulties with individual children.

Purpose of the Study

In this research, my goal has been to explore the link between what the literature implies, and what educators and parents think about the issue under investigation: parent-school collaboration.

The question I wish to answer is: **How do parents, teachers, counsellors, and principals describe parent-school collaboration?** My goal is to begin to understand how parents and educators describe parent-school collaboration, and to learn how their views are similar and also how they differ from one another. The investigation employed semi-structured interviews, and "grounded-theory" techniques of analysis, in order to uncover and describe the thoughts and beliefs of a principal, a counsellor, a teacher, and two parents concerning parent-school collaboration.

The opening question for the interviews was: "Tell me about parents and school working together..."

Origins of the Study

The topic of parent-teacher collaboration is one to which I bring over twenty years of experience and reflection, as a parent, a teacher, an elementary school consultant, a school administrator and provincial (Alberta Education) consultant. In my early years as an elementary teacher (in the early 70's), I quickly realized the

importance of working closely with parents. I sent newsletters home every couple of weeks, invited parents to come and spend time in the classroom, made home visits, and asked parents to help me figure out the "best" ways to help their children learn. This approach was not based on any particular professional preparation, but rather, I think, on an intuitive sense that parents were also part of my "clientele." However, I soon realized that many of my teacher-colleagues did not share my beliefs; they felt that they were not hired to work with parents, that their job was to teach "children." Some of my practices as a teacher even got me into difficulty, since they were often drastically different from what other teachers in my school were doing.

When I became a primary consultant in 1976, I realized that my experience was not unusual in many other public schools in Edmonton. Although I met some teachers who worked closely with parents as I had, I also came into contact with numerous other teachers who begrudged the time that working with parents took away from their "real" work of teaching. It also seemed to me that for many teachers, their sense of professionalism was related to having full control over decision-making within their classroom. They expected parents to support their decisions, but certainly not question them!

A few years later, having become a parent myself, I experienced many feelings of frustration and powerlessness that I believe resulted from not feeling valued by the school my children attended. I joined the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) in an attempt to have a meaningful role in the school, but was disappointed to find that the major function assigned to the PAC was one of fund-raising for the school. It seemed to me that parents' requests to expand that role were met with defensiveness on the part of teachers and the principal. Like many other parents, I also found myself wishing for more information about how my own children were "really" doing in school. I often felt disappointed after the brief, twice-yearly

"parent-teacher conference," where the teachers rarely asked me for my ideas about my children, or asked me for feedback on what I saw happening in their educational program.

After staying home with my children for a few years, I returned to work with the provincial Department of Education as an elementary consultant in 1984. As the Acting Associate Director of the Early Childhood Services Branch the following year, I was involved with the development of a publication entitled Bridges to Learning: A Guide to Parent Involvement in 1986, and my interest in finding better ways for schools and parents to work together continued to grow.

Over the next seven years, I held various jobs with Alberta Education, the most recent being that of Special Education Consultant in the Edmonton Regional Office. In that position, I worked on a number of Ministerial Reviews, where parents who were dissatisfied with their child's educational placement or program had turned to the Minister of Education for assistance in resolving their dispute with the school or the school system. As I met with parents and educators, I became increasingly convinced of the importance of schools and parents working together. It seemed to me that in each of these review cases, the problem could have been avoided if only parents and schools could have seen each other as "collaborators" rather than adversaries in planning and implementing the child's education.

When I left my position with Alberta Education to return to graduate studies in counselling psychology, I thought a lot about how to "bring together" my professional and personal experiences to my area of research. Because of my strong interest in the field of interpersonal relationships, it seemed natural that I find a way of researching the relationships between parents and schools from a counselling perspective.

Significance of the Study

The topic of parent-school collaboration is a relatively recent concept (in terms of parents and educators working as "partners"). There is very little research that investigates what principals, counsellors, teachers, and parents really mean when they talk about parent-school (or home-school) collaboration. I believe that one of our first steps should be to truly understand what we are talking about, and make sure that we are in fact talking about the same thing. We also need to understand what participants believe to be the barriers to parent-school collaboration.

This study is important for a number of reasons. In these times of social and economic challenges and change, particularly in the province of Alberta, it has become more important than ever for educators and parents to find more efficient ways to work together for the benefit of children. In generations past, schools were set up as extensions of the family and society; in the past 30 or 40 years, we seem to have lost the close relationship that once existed between parents and schools, and in many sectors, an adversarial tone seems to have come about. Walberg (1984) quotes research that shows that the relationship between the home and the school has deteriorated in recent decades. There seems to be a general agreement that we must find new ways to develop and support genuine partnerships, and a renewed sense of collaboration between schools and parents.

Part of Alberta Education's Three-Year Business Plan (1994-1997) for restructuring education involves increasing parental involvement in education. Another goal listed in the Three-Year Plan involves enabling parents and teachers to have "meaningful roles in decisions about policies, programs, budgets, and activities." In order for these goals to be realized, it will become critical that we

gain a much clearer understanding of what it means for parents and schools to work together.

Organization of the Study

In Chapter One, I have addressed the background to the study. The problem is stated, along with the purpose and significance of the study.

In Chapter Two, I give the reader background information and pertinent issues related to the topic of home-school collaboration. The reader is also provided with the background from the literature which provided initial support for this study. First of all, some of the literature on collaboration is reviewed. Next, historical and theoretical perspectives of family-school relationships are presented. Finally, some of the current research in parent-school collaboration is reviewed and discussed; and the implications from a counselling perspective are addressed.

Chapter Three outlines the theoretical perspective contained in the method of study, which is basically descriptive and exploratory in nature. I also describe in detail the methods and procedures that I employed to carry out this investigation.

The first part of Chapter Four includes five sections, each one devoted to one of the participants. In this chapter, the reader "meets" the participants, and listens to their own words as they describe their thoughts and beliefs about parent-school collaboration. Each person describes in detail a positive and a negative experience they have had, identifies any barriers that they can see to collaboration, and explains their "vision" of collaboration between parents and schools.

The second part of Chapter Four is an interpretation of the participants' understanding, beliefs, and experiences. In this section, common themes, similarities and differences among the participants are explored and discussed. This interpretation incorporates references to the literature reviewed in Chapter Two.

In Chapter Five, the discussion, I "re-visit" the literature in the light of the findings of my research. This approach is common in qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Finally, Chapter Six presents the main understandings which have emerged from my interviews, and presents implications for educational/counselling practice and for continued research. At this point, I also present some considerations for the interpretation of this study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Collaboration

Webster's 3rd New International Dictionary of the English Language gives us three definitions for the word "collaborate":

1. "To work jointly, in a project involving composition or research to be jointly accredited, e.g. to collaborate in writing a play or a story."

2. "To cooperate with or assist, usually willingly, an enemy of one's country (as an invading or occupying force)."

3. "To cooperate, usually willingly, with an agency or instrumentality with which one is not immediately connected."

Each of these definitions has some intriguing connotations when we begin to think about "collaboration" between schools and parents. The first definition, which is probably the most "politically correct" one to favor when referring to parent-school relationships, implies that the people involved, i.e. parents and educators, are **working together** on some mutually agreed-upon goals. It further implies that the people involved in this "project" will share the "credit" for its outcomes; if the outcome is a positive, desired one, all will share in the "glory". However, the flip side of this is that those involved will not be able to escape from the responsibility for any failures, or blame any one specific individual for things that go wrong. If we think for a moment about what frequently happens when a child has not learned to read or write by grade two or three, we quickly realize that there is a tendency these days to "blame the school" (for not having taught the child

properly, for not having diagnosed any learning problems, for having used inadequate methods, etc.) or to "blame the home" (for not having provided the right environmental experiences and support). Such an outcome of "blaming" would clearly be incompatible with our first definition as applied to collaboration between parents and schools.

The second definition, which refers to **cooperating** with or assisting an "**enemy**" of one's country, may at times seem a bit closer to what happens in terms of relationships between schools and parents. Educators "cooperate" with parents even though they are perceived as the "enemy," and they do so willingly only because they feel they have no other choice. Alternatively, parents may "cooperate" with the school, because they realize that if they don't, there could be some unpleasant repercussions for their children. After all, attending school is not a matter of choice for children between the ages of 6 and 16, and there are often very limited choices available in terms of which school to attend. Although parents do have the legal right in Alberta to choose home-schooling for their children, it is nevertheless an impractical option for the majority of people in today's society.

For most people, when we speak of parent-school collaboration, the third definition may seem even closer to reality than either the first or the second one. In this interpretation, we speak of cooperating with an "agency" with which one is not immediately connected. For the majority of parents, the school is not an agency with which they are immediately connected, in the sense of entering the building on a daily or even weekly basis, or in the sense of having daily or weekly "contact" with the people who work at the school. Parents certainly do have a connection with the school, since their children spend a large portion of every day in the school, but that connection is "second-hand" rather than "immediate." On the other hand, the school also could be seen as lacking in "immediate connection" with the

home; educators rarely make home visits, and teachers do not usually have daily or even weekly contact with parents, except through the students.

What is common to each of these three definitions, however, is the notion of "cooperation," of "working together", and usually with an element of "willingness." My intention in including the dictionary definition of collaboration at the beginning of this chapter has been to invite you, the reader, to keep these in mind as you read through my report of the study. My hope is that you will, as I have done for the past year, continue to raise questions about this topic that we as a society need to be pondering and discussing openly and frequently. In a time when the term "parent-school collaboration" is being used more and more, I believe it is crucial that we go a step further, and clarify how each of us understands this term.

What does the literature on collaboration say?

Collaboration is defined in the literature in a number of different ways. Appley and Winder (1977) define collaboration as...

> a relational system in which: (1) individuals in a group share mutual aspirations and a common conceptual framework; (2) the interactions among individuals are characterized by 'justice and fairness'; and (3) these aspirations and conceptualizations are characterized by each individual's *consciousness* of his/her motives toward the other; by *caring* or concern for the other; and by *commitment* to work with the other over time provided that this commitment is a matter of *choice*. (p. 281)

Appley and Winder (1977) suggest that competition and hierarchy no longer serve as an adequate value base for survival, that what we now require is a "revolutionary" look at the paradigms we as a society have been using to make sense of the world. They believe that we must come to view our environment as

one that requires qualitatively new solutions based upon an alternative value system, namely what they call **collaboration**. In this new value system, caring (as opposed to competition or conflict) is central, and the relational system (rather than the individual) is the basic unit of collaborative effort.

In a synthesis of research on organizational collaboration, Hord (1986) reviews the literature and concludes that "while there is little argument about the need for or value of collaboration... there is disagreement about what 'counts' as collaboration" (p. 22). Hord discusses some of the distinctions that have been made between **cooperation** and **collaboration**, and suggests that making a distinction provides a useful structure for exploring the literature. Collaboration is seen as a higher-level activity than cooperation. In cooperation, parties (each with separate "programs") agree to work together to make their programs more successful; in collaboration, parties involved are also seen as sharing responsibility and authority for basic decision-making. According to Hord, conflicts may arise when it is not clear which model is in process, that is, when some individuals are involved in cooperation, and others are expecting collaboration. Thus, the necessity for clarifying expectations of participants is paramount.

Hord uses the metaphor of the family to clarify the distinction between cooperation and collaboration. A mother *cooperates* with her son by allowing and encouraging his rock band to practice in their home; the son cooperates with the mother by cleaning the house before guests arrive. These activities are cooperative in that they are mutually agreeable but not for mutual benefit. On the other hand, the family *collaborates* in preparing a family meal together, they each offer some form of expertise that is rewarding to all. As we think about the relationship between parents and schools, it makes sense to apply this concept to parents who have the specialized knowledge of their individual child, and educators who have the specialized knowledge of educational theory and practice.

Quoting Appley and Winder (1977), Hord (1986) defines collaboration as a relational system of individuals, in which individuals share mutual aspirations (goals) and where there is a joining of resources. In Hord's framework, parity among individuals is considered very important as well. Collaboration is seen as working *with* rather than working *on*. Hord (1986) also summarizes some of the hypotheses about collaboration that are derived from the literature:

1. Collaborative relationships are more likely to grow from successful previous experiences.
2. Goals that are clear and mutually held will aid collaboration.
3. Achieving short-term goals will encourage a positive view and encourage progress.
4. Assumptions and decisions in a collaboration seem to come out of personal experience.

Until about ten years ago, most literature on parent-school relationships was literature that discussed and promoted "parent involvement" (Sattes, 1985). Recently, the more frequently used terms are "family-school partnerships," or "parent-school collaboration" (Coleman & Tabin, 1992; Epstein, 1992).

Current professional literature is filled with the concept of "collaboration" as a driving theme in education (Cook & Friend, 1991). It is discussed in terms of relationships within schools and school systems, and among schools, families, and communities. Collaboration is also mentioned frequently as a component in early childhood programs.

Some of the recent literature on **educational collaboration** has come from the field of special education, as a factor in the delivery of services to many types of students. For example, Idol and West (1991) write about educational collaboration within the school, with an emphasis on staff working together. Idol and West define collaboration as both "a structured process and an interactive

relationship among individuals" (p. 72). Like Hord, they make a distinction between cooperation and collaboration. Referring to school staffs, Idol and West (1991) claim that many make efforts to cooperate, but far fewer are actually collaborating:

> Cooperation is a term that assumes two or more parties, each with separate and autonomous programs, agree to work together in making all such programs more successful. In contrast, collaboration implies that the parties involved share responsibility and authority for basis decision-making. (Idol & West, 1991, p. 75)

Cook and Friend (1991) also discuss collaboration from the perspective of special education programs and services. They point out that although many authors are advocating collaborative practices, few have clarified exactly what it is that makes a practice or program collaborative. Cook and Friend propose the following definition of collaboration, referring to collaboration as a **style** rather than a **process**:

> Collaboration is a style for direct interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision-making as they work towards a common goal. (p. 6)

By referring to collaboration as a style, Cook and Friend believe that collaboration can be considered in many contexts. They also propose the following characteristics of collaboration:

1. **Collaboration is voluntary.** People must choose to carry out activities in a collaborative style, it cannot be mandated.
2. **Individuals who collaborate share a common goal.** However, shared goals must be specific enough so that they can be operationalized and

evaluated. (Wanting "what is best for the student" is not considered to be specific enough!)

3. **Collaboration requires parity among participants.** Participants must believe that they have something valuable to contribute to the collaborative activity, and that this contribution is valued by others.

4. **Collaboration includes shared responsibility for decisions.** Even though tasks may be divided, participants should agree on key aspects of all decisions. If not, it is likely that miscommunication will occur and collaboration will not occur.

5. **Individuals who collaborate share accountability for outcomes.** This is the case whether or not the activities are successful. This further implies that placing fault on individuals is not appropriate; in collaboration, if a problem occurs, it too is shared.

6. **Collaboration includes sharing resources.** A sense of ownership is essential, and contributing resources (time, money, materials, etc.) assists in the development of this sense.

7. **Emergent characteristics.** Cook and Friend (1991) propose that collaboration has some elements that are needed for it to begin, but that also grow in strength as collaboration occurs. For example, trust in one another is required before people undertake a collaborative activity; if they continue to work together, that trust generally increases. Furthermore, if people are to collaborate, they must believe that the time and effort will be worthwhile; with successful collaborative efforts, belief in the collaborative style becomes stronger.

Cook and Friend (1991) also present the following principles to clarify how school collaboration functions. These can easily be modified to apply to school-family collaboration:

Principle 1: Collaboration as a style may exist in almost any school program, but it is not a prerequisite to most school programs. The 'style' can be separated from the program, service, or activity. Schools may 'involve' parents in ways that would not necessarily be considered collaborative.

Principle 2: Collaboration in schools may occur informally as well as through organizational efforts. In parent-teacher interactions, many of the informal contacts can be very collaborative.

Principle 3: Collaboration requires time to develop. Participants need to learn about one another, to establish trust and respect, and to develop the informal 'rules' that will enable them to collaborate.

Principle 4: Collaboration is not a panacea. Some types of dilemmas require administrative/supervisory resolution; other situations will be better dealt with individually.

Principle 5: Collaboration may raise ethical issues for professionals working with students with disabilities. For example, the constitutional rights of students may be inconsistent with collaborative activities.

In a recent article entitled Trends Toward Increased Family-School Collaboration, Moore and Littlejohn (1992) outline some models and activities related to family-school collaboration, and some of the implications for educators. They define collaboration as "an interactive **process** in which all of the parties are equal parties" (p. 42), and emphasize that equal partnership implies that parents need to be included in a variety of roles, in every aspect of the school program. Moore and Littlejohn state:

> For collaboration to occur, there must be a sense of partnership, one which emerges through an understanding that it takes both parents

> and educators to make possible the positive outcomes that all desire for children... Collaboration requires all parties to break out of traditional views of their roles... both parents and educators need to acknowledge and appreciate the necessary contributions of a reciprocal relationship or an educational partnership. All persons are valued for their perspectives and contributions; all are willing to acknowledge more than one right answer or way to accomplish positive goals for children. (p. 42)

According to Moore and Littlejohn, there is no one best definition of collaboration. In fact, they say that individuals often have difficulty defining it, but most agree that they know when it happens. Citing Moore (1990), Moore and Littlejohn present five barriers to collaboration: distance (physical or psychological) between parents and teachers, lack of teacher training, biases in race and class, limited view of parent involvement (on the part of both educators and parents), and the school's perceptions (of parents). They state that the most effective models of collaboration are those that:

- use a "top-down" approach, where there is leadership, commitment, and support from the administrators. This commitment was both philosophical (i.e., collaboration is the right thing to do, and will contribute to children's school success) and concrete (in terms of resources, release time for teachers, and technical assistance).
- acknowledge and act on the changed and changing roles of parents and educators, with a willingness on the part of everyone to learn new ways of communicating, cooperating, and thinking. Teamwork is seen as the critical element that makes collaboration happen.

- value all persons for their perspectives and contributions. This means that everyone must be willing to listen and negotiate.
- allow for "false starts," and provide support to both parents and educators in their efforts to work together.

The terms "partnership" and "collaboration" continue to be used interchangeably in much of the current professional literature. The following are two of the main points suggested by Christenson, Rounds, and Franklin (1992) to support the need for a "partnership" approach in education among the home, school, and community:

(1) In today's society, schools alone can no longer meet all of children's needs. The sheer numbers of at-risk children, problem situations, and changing demographics... dictate a collaborative stance.

(2) Children learn, grow, and develop both at home and at school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). There is not a clear-cut boundary between home and school; rather, there is a mutually influencing quality among home and school experiences.

In defining home-school collaboration, Christenson et al (1992) make a distinction between parent involvement and collaboration. They see collaboration as a broader and more inclusive term than parent involvement. Parent involvement focuses on the parents' role only, whereas collaboration focuses on the relationship between the home and the school, and how parents and educators work together towards a common goal. Christenson et al (1992) point out that the differentiation of the terms parent involvement, parent education, and home-school collaboration is essential for understanding the literature and current practice. Most research and practice has focused on parent involvement or parent education, which have been the most common terms used until the late 1980's. According to Christenson et al (1992):

> The activity in which parents and teachers are involved does not distinguish home-school collaboration from parent involvement. Rather, it is the philosophy of partners working toward a common goal and with shared power that characterizes home-school collaboration. Thus, activities can be similar in parent involvement and home-school collaboration programs; however, the attitude with which the activities are implemented is different. (p. 21)
>
> Parents can be involved in their child's schooling without collaborating with educators. Home-school collaboration is an attitude, not an activity, and occurs when partners (parents and educators) share common goals and responsibilities, are seen as equals, and contribute to the collaborative process. (p. 22)

Historical and Theoretical Perspectives of School-Family Relationships

Parents and families have always been involved in the education of their children, to the point that most writers refer to parents as being the oldest and most essential part of any education system (Berger, 1987). Parent involvement in the education of children has in fact been present since prehistoric times, with the family providing most of children's education informally until the introduction of public schooling. As early as the seventeenth century, ideas about the importance of the home in the education of children were developed by such social thinkers as Locke (1632-1704), Rousseau (1712-1778), Pestalozzi (1747-1827), and Froebel. The emphasis on parental influence continued well into the first half of the twentieth century, when, as Berger (1987) notes, a number of child development experts began to suggest that rearing children was not instinctive, and that parents needed some guidance and reinforcement. The "parent education movement" began in the

early 1900s, although the emphasis at that time was more on the parents' role in the mental health of children.

Parent involvement was recognized as an important element in a child's success at school, but "parent involvement" at this stage meant parents supporting and assisting the schools. The Parent Teacher Association (PTA), founded in the United States in 1897 as a parent body within the education system, was initially concerned with matters pertaining to children's affairs, such as the passing of child labor laws and monitoring general health and welfare issues. However, with frequent interaction and cooperation, parents and teachers realized that they sought a common goal, to strive to provide the best education for the children. Parent education and involvement became an institutionalized part of the school through the actions of the PTA.

By the late 1950s, there began to be a far greater concern for the cognitive development of children. In 1952, Piaget's work The Origins of Intelligence in Children was translated into English. In the Manchester Survey (part of the Plowden Report), Wiseman (1967) examined the relationship between environmental variables and school attainment. He concluded that "the most important of our findings... is the demonstration that the major forces associated with educational attainment are to be found within the home circumstances of the children" (p. 27). The results indicated that the school contributed 18%, the neighborhood 20%, and the home 62% towards the child's school attainment. Thus, parent attitudes towards education had a stronger influence on a child's achievement than the socio-economic status of the home.

In spite of this emphasis on the home and its influence on the intellectual development of the child, between 1950 and 1970 the major responsibility for children's formal, academic education was delegated almost entirely to the schools.

Topping (1986) notes that many teachers felt threatened with parental intrusion, and as a result, the educative function of parents declined rapidly:

> In a way, then, the development of formalized education in schools served largely to rob parents of a function they had carried for millennia. (p. 1)

Gradually, though, the pendulum swung back once again, and the trend changed toward increased parent involvement in the schools. During the 1960s, there was a vast output of research material to indicate that the development and standard of children's abilities at school are a reflection of the type of relationship they have with their parents in the home setting. Gordon (1969), Hunt (1961), and Bloom (1964) produced evidence indicating that from the time of birth a child is developing socially, mentally, physically, and emotionally. This led to renewed emphasis by educators on enhancing parents' roles in child development, particularly at the pre-school and primary levels.

James Coleman, principal investigator and author of the famous 1966 Coleman Report in the United States, has written a paper entitled Families and Schools (1987), where he traces the evolution of schools, families, and society over the last few centuries. In this paper, Coleman recounts how over the past two centuries, our society has come to be transformed from a set of communities where families were the "central building blocks" to a social system in which the central organizations are business firms, and families are at the periphery. In the mid-1800s, with the dawn of the industrial age, economically productive activities began to move outside the household. Men left the farm, or the neighborhood shop, and went away to the office or factory. Coleman suggests that public schooling ("mass formal schooling") came into being to replace what had once gone on in the household, the passing of productive skills to children.

Coleman (1987) goes on to say that there has been another significant societal change in the twentieth century, with important implications for the schools. First, the man removed his productive activity from the household, and now the household is also experiencing the loss of the woman's presence. According to Coleman, this loss parallels the loss of the man's presence about a century ago. However, schools have not yet "caught up" with the change in terms of how they view their tasks. As women joined the paid labor force, the household lost certain functions that had been important for the school's ability to accomplish its task, which is to instill in children those personal characteristics which lead to good school performance.

Coleman (1991) sees the school as a constructed organization designed to complement the family in child rearing. However, he believes that families at all economic levels are becoming ill-equipped to provide the setting that schools are designed to complement and augment in preparing the next generation. Expanding on the source of this deficiency, Coleman (1987) discusses some of the elements that have come to be missing from home and community. As the family has weakened in its capacity to raise its young, the constructed organization (i.e., the school) must also change its character.

Coleman (1987) proposes the idea of "social capital," which exists in the relations between persons. By "social capital", he means the norms, the social networks, and the relationships between adults and children that are of value for the child's growing up. Maintaining that this "social capital" is now in short supply for children and youth in our society, he suggests that "the effectiveness of schools in settings where the social capital of the family and community is weak depends upon the rebuilding of that social capital" (Coleman, 1991, p. 14). Coleman believes that this social capital can only be built by the schools with the participation of parents.

In a vein similar to Coleman, Comer (1986) argues that until the 1940s, parent involvement in the schools, though indirect, was meaningful and constant. In small towns and rural areas, parents had everyday contact with the teachers and principals. There was a greater sense of community and cultural uniformity, and the schools were natural extensions of the community. After World War II came many technological, scientific, cultural and social changes, which resulted in a change in the level of trust and agreement between home and school. Training and achievement requirements were raised for teachers, administrators, and students alike; the content of the curriculum began to change, along with increased focus on teaching methods. According to Comer (1986), very little attention was paid to what it takes to create a context for effective teaching and learning, and most teachers and administrators were not trained to work with parents, or to use parents as allies in promoting the growth and development of students.

Comer and Haynes (1991) point out that the involvement of parents in their children's education is now widely accepted as desirable and even essential to effective schooling. Comer and Haynes cite Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Lightfoot (1978), who both emphasized the need to find new ways to cultivate a partnership between schools and families. However, Comer and Haynes (1991) point out that:

> A significant number of educational practitioners are ambivalent about parental involvement in the schools, and parent participation is not significant in many schools even when parents are invited. This is the case, in part, because the rationale for such involvement is often not grounded in child development, relationship, and systems theory. As a result, issues that interfere with successful parental involvement and staff interaction are not addressed, and the experience is satisfactory for neither staff nor parents. (p. 272)

Comer (1986) proposes that programs that involve parents in the schools can play a major role in creating a desirable context for teaching and learning. However, there are many obstacles in the way of parent participation in the schools. Some of the obstacles that Comer identifies are the following:

- many schools don't want parents present;
- many parents are reluctant to become involved for various reasons;
- some schools pay "lip service" to the importance of parent participation, but don't give parents the opportunity to play a meaningful role in the life of the school;
- some schools only call parents when there is a problem with a child.

Comer (1986) and Comer and Haynes (1991) describe a parent participation model developed by the Yale Child Study Center Team, which was implemented in the New Haven public schools in 1968, and continued on through to 1984. The model resulted in dramatic improvements in student achievement and parent attitudes, and supported Comer's belief that active and meaningful participation by parents in the school is an important way of developing a sense of cooperation:

> The model restores trust, mutual respect, and agreement among the adults. It brings parents into the school at times other than when their children are in trouble. It uses parents as their strengths permit and develops in them a sense of ownership of the school and responsibility for its outcomes. The presence of parents and the support they offer decrease conflict and apathy in the school. All these changes help to create a desirable school climate. (Comer, 1986, p. 446)

The roles that the family and the school can have in children's education demand systematic inquiry, particularly as we consider the dramatic changes occurring in these social institutions (Schneider, 1993; Coleman, 1987; Epstein, 1992). Traditional families represent a much smaller proportion of North American households; women are entering the labor force in increasing numbers, leaving supervision of children to other child care institutions. Schools have also undergone major structural changes. The growth of school districts and the professionalization of teachers have, in many instances, distanced schools from the families and communities they once served (Schneider, 1993). The distance between families and schools is further exacerbated by television and the commercial world. Perhaps now, more than ever, families and schools need to support each other in the education of the children they "share."

Litwak and Meyer (1974) conceive of school-community relations in terms of the "distance" between the school and its families or neighborhoods. They outline three points of view among educators with respect to the importance of the "community" for the school's objectives:

1. The "closed-door" position, which assumes that schools can best handle within their walls all the major problems of education, and therefore community participation should be kept to a minimum.

2. The "open-door" position, which assumes that many of the basic educational processes take place outside the school building, in the family, peer group, and neighborhood; and that the motivation necessary for learning in school has its source in the everyday life of the child. This position necessitates intimate school-community contacts.

3. The "balance theory", which asserts that both intimate and distant school-community relations must be balanced in different degrees under different circumstances to optimize educational objectives.

Litwak and Meyer (1974) adopt the third point of view, the "balance theory," saying that "it seems most inclusive, fits the experience of educators in more complex urban settings and... rests on a more general theoretical analysis of the complementary functions of primary groups and of bureaucratic organizations in the achievement of social goals" (p. 6). As Litwak and Meyer recognized in this "balance theory," effective school-community relations require a happy medium between intrusive parental involvement and completely autonomous professionals. As they state, "optimal social distance is a determinable point between the extremes of intimacy and isolation. At such a point, schools will be close enough to coordinate activities with families but not so close as to impair the performance of professional educational tasks" (Litwak & Meyer, 1974, p. 6).

Litwak and Meyer's "balance theory" also calls attention to the differences in the "settings" of the communications between "experts" (educators) and "non-experts" (parents). The bureaucratic setting of the complex organization of the experts (the school) is held in sharp contrast to the organizational form of the family (Litwak & Meyer, p. 113). The functions of each "setting" are different enough to produce the conflicts between teachers and parents which have been frequently noted in the literature (e.g., Goldring, 1986; Lightfoot, 1978).

In her 1978 book, Worlds Apart, Lightfoot (1978) remarks, "In order to fully capture family-school interactions, families need to be seen as educative environments" (p. 2). However, her thinking seems closer to that of Litwak and Meyer, in the sense of acknowledging the need for "balance" in school-family relationships. Lightfoot (1978) suggests that home-school relations are inherently in conflict. She believes that different priorities and perceptions of families and schools, such as concern for one's own child versus responsibility for group progress, will inevitably create conflict over the means of attaining common goals. These positional differences are exacerbated when children have disabilities, or

when parents and schools have differing views about what the form and content of education should be. However, Lightfoot (1978) points out that parents and teachers share the job of socializing children, and that their roles sometimes overlap and are not always clearly defined. Lightfoot believes that parent-school collaboration has been largely a one-way process, with schools seldom accommodating, in a significant way, the needs of parents or families.

Issues relating to **conflict** between parents and schools are being increasingly addressed in the literature on parent-school relationships. Moles (1987), while promoting parent participation in education as "an idea whose time has come," points out that the elements of confrontation and power-sharing tend to make educators and school officials uneasy with parents in the roles of advocates and decision-makers, roles in which parents are becoming increasingly interested.

Fine (1993) also proposes that questions of power, authority, and control must be addressed within any debates on parent participation in the schools. Arguing that the relationship between parents and educators is not a "power-neutral" partnership, Fine suggests that we need to look closely at what roles parents might play in the education structures and practices, and that we need to consider what it is that parents say they want from this work. In a response to the Fine (1993) article, Epstein (1993) says that when most parents are asked how they want to be involved in their children's education, they don't use words like "power," "authority," and "control." The terms they use are "information," "communication," and "participation." Epstein goes on to say that it is important to make a distinction between **power** and **partnership**; the politics of power often yield conflict and disharmony, whereas the politics (and semantics) of partnership stress equity and caring relationships:

> The two approaches take and use a different vocabulary for leadership roles and leadership styles, and focus on different

> outcomes for parents and for children. In building comprehensive programs of partnership we know that those in power must come to care, and those who care must gain some power. (Epstein, 1993, p. 715).

The terms "parent involvement" and "parent participation" have tended to be used synonymously and interchangeably. However, involvement can range from a parents turning up to parents' evenings, to assisting children in learning activities at home and/or at the school, to direct collaboration in the learning process and the curriculum. David Seeley, in his 1981 book Education Through Partnership, suggests that the "problem" with public education is that we have adopted the wrong kind of system, one which he refers to as a "service-delivery-system mentality." However, from Seeley's perspective, education is by its nature not a service and not deliverable. Seeley (1981) says that educators have responded to the difficulties of educational relationships in modern society by retreating into a separate world of professional service delivery, that they have set out to *serve* families, but not to *collaborate* with them. When schools, parents, and students come to think of their relationships in terms of service delivery--of "provider" and "client", or "professionals" and "target populations", genuine partnership is driven out of education.

In a similar vein, Wolfendale (1983) suggests that parents have traditionally been viewed by educators as *clients*, and only recently as *partners*. According to Wolfendale, the client concept views parents as dependent on experts' opinions, passive in the receipt of services, and peripheral to decision-making. In contrast, the partner concept views parents as having equal strengths and "equivalent" expertise, as active and central in decision-making and implementation, as able to contribute to as well as receive services, and as sharing responsibility.

The concept of service delivery, unlike that of partnership, leads to conflict-producing ambiguities about whether the provider or the client wields more power in the relationship. The service-delivery concept of education also makes families either victims or villains; when learning does not take place, the client can blame the provider, and the provider can blame the client.

Seeley (1981) believes that the solution to this problem requires fundamental changes in both philosophy and technique. He proposes a framework whereby the concept of service delivery is replaced by the concept of **partnership**--partnership between learners and teachers, homes and schools, and communities and school systems. According to Seeley (1982), the chief characteristic of partnership is common effort toward common goals. Partners may help one another in general or specific ways, but none is ever a client, because the relationship is mutual. Another characteristic of partnership is that the emphasis must be on mutual accountability among partners in the learning process, rather than on professional power and exclusiveness. Using the terms "partnership" and "collaborative relationship" interchangeably, Seeley (1982), says that he is advocating for a "collaborative" relationship between teachers, parents, students, and citizens.

As Seeley (1981) says, "the crucial issue in successful learning is not home or school, teacher or student, but the relationship between them. Learning takes place where there is a productive learning relationship" (p. 11). However, Seeley admits that shifting from a "service-delivery" approach to a partnership policy in education will not be easy. He refers to the work of Lightfoot (1978), who describes how social policy created a conceptual dichotomy of the child's existence into socialization and education. It is precisely this separation that has permitted researchers to neglect the "relatedness" of schools and families. However, Lightfoot's observations and interviews with hundreds of parents and teachers

confirm that in the real world, the issue of family-school relationships is a dominant theme in the lives and experiences of parents, teachers, and children, and a major factor affecting educational effectiveness and legitimacy (Lightfoot, 1978, p. 12). The partnership concept recognizes the legitimacy of both parents' and schools' roles in the educational process. According to Seeley (1981), accepting both roles necessarily entails accepting also the potential for **conflict** between them, but it has the merit of forcing policy makers and educational practitioners to find ways of living with both.

Studies indicate (Ost, 1988; Lightfoot, 1978) that the majority of teachers and principals see the ideal relationship with parents as one in which parents *support* teacher practices and school in general, *carry out* requests but do not interfere with plans and decisions. Although parent involvement in instruction contributes to student success, teachers and administrators often fail to establish strong links between home and school (Collinge & Coleman, 1992). A variety of reasons are offered to explain this situation; for example, time availability, negative perceptions of parental interest (Epstein, 1992), and concern for professional autonomy (Power, 1985). Some teachers are concerned about the parents' power to question their authority and professional competence. Baskwill (1989) points out that parents are also confronted with issues of competence:

> We teachers have a great deal of power over the lives not only of the children we teach but of their families as well. We have the power to make the best of parents doubt their own abilities. We have the power to create feelings of guilt or frustration, to confuse, anger, or reduce to tears even the most stalwart. We have the power to impose -- or simply allow -- an unbalanced relationship that puts too much guilt on one party, too much authority and responsibility on

> the other, so that no real communication, no real sharing of ideas and information can occur. (p. 5)

When teachers do reach out, the focus of the partnership is seldom on curricular concerns, which is the focus that is most likely to directly influence student learning and achievement (Collinge & Coleman, 1992).

In an article published in The Educational Forum, David Ost (1988) claims that parents and the society at large feel disenfranchised from the schooling process. Ost says that many teachers and schools are operating in isolation from the culture and, basic to this isolation, there is a hiatus between parents and teachers.

> The current norms for general teacher behavior are the result of years of increasing isolation of schools and teacher education programs from the culture... Thus, schools generally, and teachers specifically, are unprepared for large-scale direct parent involvement in the education of students. Furthermore, there is not comprehensive, research-based knowledge to provide a theory for teachers to adopt in response to the increasing demand for high quality teacher-parent interaction. (p. 166)

In an attempt to address this problem, Ost presents the argument that schools, parents (community) and students are all interrelated and function within a complex ecology. An underlying premise for increasing teacher-parent interaction is that the relationships between school and community are part of a complex ecological system. This view is consistent with the ecological theory of human development and the evidence that a child's academic success is, in large part, determined by congruence of home and school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). However, although most educators understand the importance of parent-teacher interaction, they do not necessarily have the skills or knowledge to work effectively with parents. While some early childhood programs include specialized training in

working with parents, most other teacher education programs limit training to parent-teacher conferencing. Ost (1988) lists six common "fallacies" concerning teacher-parent interaction:

(1) Educators have the skills and techniques to work effectively with parents.

(2) Teacher-parent interaction is the same at all levels of schooling.

(3) Teacher-parent interaction is the same regardless of the school or community.

(4) Teachers are professionally and personally secure to the point that working with parents poses no threat or intimidation.

(5) Family structures remain the same throughout the years that a child is in school.

(6) Teacher-parent relationships are formed as a result of objective and rational behavior, and in isolation of the child's relationships.

Ost (1988) points out that each of these "fallacies" form the basis of a serious challenge in terms of how teachers and parents work together, and concludes:

> There probably has never been a time when the teacher is being asked to do more in support of children in the light of the changing family unit, school, and society. Knowing how to foster increased teacher-parent interaction would be one more tool for marshalling available resources in the awesome challenge of today's schooling. In earlier years, there were numerous mechanisms that fostered collaboration between schools and parents. For example, most teachers lived, and were contributing members of, the community; parental expectations for their children were reflected in the concern of both parents and teachers; and the school was the hub of

> community activity. Since the 1950's, however, parents have become increasingly isolated from the lives of their children as affected by the schools... [Also], what was normal, acceptable teacher behavior and responsibility of the past -- that is, an on-going interaction with parents -- is foreign to many of today's professionals... Nevertheless, educators do recognize both the need for, and importance of, improved teacher-parent interactions. (p. 171-172)

Ost (1988) proposes that any efforts for improving school-parent interactions should be made within the context of the school-community ecology; although individual teachers can contribute significantly to parental participation in a child's learning, if the effort is not a school-wide commitment, the effect is minimal. Since the milieu of public schools has changed, teacher-parent interaction can no longer be addressed informally. Ost believes that productive strategies must be developed to foster cooperative concern for students on the part of both school and parent.

Research repeatedly identifies parent and home environment variables as among the most important factors in school achievement (Coleman et al, 1966; Sattes, 1985; Henderson, 1988). Major studies over the past 20 years have indicated that parents are significant educators of their children, and that not even the best school can do the job alone (Bloom, 1981; Moles, 1987; Rich, 1988). Furthermore, parent attitudes towards learning and towards the school have an impact on student achievement (Sattes, 1985). However, as Epstein (1992) points out, until recently most studies have not focused on the effects of school practices to involve families.

Epstein (1992) summarizes the various theoretical perspectives on schools and families as being based on (a) separate responsibilities, (b) sequenced

responsibilities, (c) embedded relationships, or (d) overlapping responsibilities and spheres of influence. She proposes that our perceptions have changed during the past half century, reflecting the changing needs of families, schools, and children in our society. The model that she favors is the last one, which "integrates and extends Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, Leichter's (1974) insights on families as educators, Litwak and Meyer's (1974) perspectives on connections of professional and nonprofessional institutions and individuals, Seeley's (1981) emphasis on shared responsibility" (Epstein, 1992, p. 1141).

The "spheres of influence" on children's learning and development include the family and the school, or, in full form, the family, school, community and peer group. The model of "overlapping spheres of influence" recognizes that although some practices of families and schools are conducted independently, other practices reflect the shared responsibilities of parents and educators for children's learning and development. The spheres of influence can be pushed closer together to overlap and create an area for partnership activities, or pushed apart to separate the family and school bases on forces that operate in each environment (Epstein, 1994). Across the grades as children, families, and schools change, the nature and extent of the "overlap" in practices and the interpersonal relationships among partners also change. An important aspect of the "overlapping spheres" model is the child's role in school and family partnerships. The model is based on the assumption that children's learning, development, and success are the main reasons for home and school partnerships:

> When schools and families work in partnership, students hear that school is important from their parents and teachers, and perceive that caring people in both environments are investing and coordinating time and resources to help them succeed. The students' own work

> is legitimized by this process of mutual support. (Epstein, 1992, p. 1141)

Epstein (1992) talks about the importance of developing more "school-like families," where parents have or develop important knowledge about parenting, family influence, and school that helps their children succeed. She suggests that just as important for the concept of overlapping spheres of influence is "the fact that some schools--family-like schools--gain important knowledge about families and their strengths to establish productive partnerships" (Epstein, 1992, p. 1148).

Recent Theory and Research on Parent-School Collaboration

Over the last two decades, the relationship between parents and schools has been receiving increasing attention (Lightfoot, 1978; Henderson, 1986; Garfunkel, 1986). The traditional role of parents, which has been largely passive and accepting of whatever schools had to offer, has been challenged more and more, particularly in the area of special education (Garfunkel, 1986). Garfunkel, writing about the different kinds of relationships that exist between schools and parents, refers to the "partnership" relationship as discussed by Berger (1987) and the "adversarial" relationship described by Lightfoot (1978). According to Garfunkel, the choice between "partnership" and "adversarial" (or political) approaches is mainly a function of parental satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the educational status quo, as well as where parents perceive the problem "is" -- in the student or in the school. If parents are satisfied with the system, they will fit well into a "partnership" model; in other words, Garfunkel (1986) suggests that partnership models are status quo models. "Parents can be 'partners' with schools if, and only if, there are common values and purposes serving as a foundation for educational program" (p. 25).

Summarizing the past 15-20 years of research in parent involvement, Henderson (1989) shows that when parents are involved in their children's education, these children have higher educational achievement, better attendance records, and more positive attitudes about education:

> It is clear that everyone benefits when parents are involved in their children's education. Not only do individual children and their families function more effectively, but there is an *aggregate* effect on the performance of students and teachers when schools collaborate with parents. The research also tells us that parent involvement works better when parents are given a variety of roles to play. (p. 57)

However, research does not support the belief that parental involvement will, in and of itself, transform student learning (Fine, 1993). Thus, parent involvement is necessary but not sufficient to produce improved student outcomes. Studies in parent involvement tend to examine one of three general approaches:

(1) improving the parent-child relationship,

(2) introducing parent involvement in the school program, and

(3) building a partnership between the home and school.

Those studies that have used the third approach generally suggest that involving parents in their children's education at home is the most effective in improving an individual student's performance (Epstein, 1992). However, this is not necessarily sufficient to make a difference for the school as a whole, and it appears that each of the three approaches must be considered (Henderson, 1988).

One of the most important factors in a child's success in school is the degree to which his or her parents are actively involved in the child's education (Schneider, 1993). Yet, as Schneider (1993) states, we still know very little about those actions parents take that actually improve school performance. It is known, however, that

parents participation in a child's education is affected by the parents' orientation towards education, their financial and social resources, and the opportunities made available by the schools and the communities in which they live.

The study of family-school relations has been dominated by educators and sociologists (Schneider, 1993), each bringing their own perspectives to the topic. Educational researchers have been primarily concerned with identifying activities that parents can do to help students develop and improve their cognitive and social skills (Leichter, 1974; Epstein, 1987). Social scientists who have studied family-school relationships have focused on factors such as family occupational status, income, educational attainment, and the quality of the child care within the family. They have not typically focused on the processes by which some families support and create opportunities for learning (Coleman, 1987). Generally, research has not focused on how parents and educators themselves actually describe what they understand by "a good working relationship," or collaboration between parents and the school.

After studying the existing research on parent involvement, Fullan (1982) concluded that most parents' concerns for the programs that their children presently experience are more intense and of greater importance than programs with which their children are not currently associated. For example, for most parents, involvement in school or system-wide advisory councils is not meaningful.

Lightfoot (1978) presents convincing arguments for "shared environments" as a part of parent involvement. She believes that the sharing of knowledge concerning the child's experiences in a particular setting (shared environment) will help the teacher and the parents in their respective roles as facilitators of the child's education:

> In order to effectively attend to children in one setting, the adult sponsors would have to be aware of life in the other [setting], see

> the child's experience as continuous, and seek an integration of educational realms. (Lightfoot, 1978, p. 2)

The results of a major U.S. study conducted by Harris Associates in 1987 concluded that parents are eager, not only to be kept informed of what is happening at school, but also to be actively consulted about many school policies. Majorities of both teachers and parents endorse active consultation concerning a variety of important school practices and policies, but many teachers want to reserve the "pedagogical" areas for themselves. In other words, when asked to give their views on parents and schools working together, parents and educators agreed in some areas and disagreed in others:

- Both educators and parents endorse a role for parents that includes volunteer work, supportive activities, and promotional efforts.
- Both agree that teachers (and the schools in general) should be taking the first steps to increase involvement of parents with schools.
- They disagree over proposals that might give parents power over curriculum or pedagogy; although small or near majorities of parents support this idea, only a quarter of educators go along with such proposals.

A 1988 study by Leitch and Tangri on barriers to home-school collaboration focused on junior high schools, and assessed both parents' and schools' concerns. Leitch and Tangri sought to identify relevant issues in relationships between home and school by exploring the barriers to collaboration, as seen by parents and teachers. The study was based on "the belief in the importance of the parent-teacher relationship and [the authors'] recognition that both sets of perceptions must be explored together if communication barriers are to be understood and addressed"

(Leitch & Tangri, 1988, p. 70). Extensive interviews were conducted with teachers and school administrators (29 teachers) in two junior high schools, and in the home with 60 parents. The most frequent barrier as seen by the teachers was the parents, and their attitudes toward the school. Teachers also identified either the school or the larger system as major barriers. When parents were asked to identify barriers to home-school collaboration, they also centered the barriers in themselves, citing work responsibilities, lack of time, health problems, and economic differences between themselves and teachers. From this study, Leitch and Tangri concluded that "it isn't misperceptions of each other that are the root of home-school problems, it is the lack of specific planning, or, at a more basic level, the lack of knowledge about how each can use the other person more effectively that is a major barrier" (p. 74).

Historically the research on parents and schools has focused primarily on those families and/or schools facing crises concerning students (Lightfoot, 1978; Lindle, 1989). The findings concluded that socioeconomic status differences between teachers (or other school personnel) and the families-in-crisis increase the alienation of parents from schools (Lightfoot, 1978; Schaefer, 1983).

A recent study has been carried out by Lindle (1989) and Lindle and Boyd (1991) at the University of Pittsburgh, examining the relationship between schools and families in four school systems. The objective of this study was to identify, through interviews with school personnel and parents, the mechanisms that schools provide to promote school and parent/family communications. The researchers asked parents to evaluate their experiences with school communications, and to suggest improvements. Parents were also asked to reflect on the worst and the best experiences they had with any schools. The findings of this study refute earlier conclusions concerning differences in socioeconomic status; Lindle and Boyd

(1991) found that all families, regardless of socioeconomic status, have similar preferences about the nature and the conduct of school communications.

Lindle (1989) and Lindle and Boyd (1991) reported that the preferences of parents are **not** what school personnel think they are; according to this study, parents view a professional, business-like manner as undesirable. Parents mentioned their dissatisfaction with school people who are "too businesslike," "patronizing," or who "talk down to us." Instead, parents reported a "personal touch" as the most enhancing factor in school relations. Parents said they valued "timely information" rather than any special considerations from teachers. All parents seemed to prefer relationships of a less formal nature with their child's teachers. Lindle (1989) concluded that parents don't want a "professional-client" relationship with the school, they want to be seen as equal partners with schools in the rearing of children. "Schools that demand parental support without reciprocating will be likely to experience increasing discord" (Lindle, 1989, p. 14). Parents also felt that the school ought to be a large part of their own lives as well as of their children's lives. Their remarks show a preference for a "social partnership" with the schools, emphasizing a preference for informal contacts on a more regular basis, rather than formal conferences and meetings.

Referring to Litwak and Meyer's (1974) "balance theory" described in the previous section, Lindle and Boyd (1991) suggest that a new balance is needed in our school-community relations, as a result of "momentous demographic shifts." They propose that:

> The greater professionalism now being sought for educators needs to be tempered by a recognition that a truly collaborative partnership between parents and teachers is more imperative than ever, because of the decline of both the nuclear family and of cohesive, neighborhood communities. Many parents now need much more

> support and assistance from the schools than in the past, as they try to cope with parenting in the depleted social fabric of today's communities. And educators vitally need the assistance and knowledge that only parents can supply. (p. 324)

Lindle and Boyd (1991) suggest that Litwak and Meyer's 1974 notion of "expert" and "non-expert" tasks must be reconsidered in light of the findings of their study. Referring to Coleman's (1987) notion about households specializing in either child-rearing or making money, Lindle and Boyd propose that the households that choose child-rearing may expect to be considered part of the group of specialists who deal with children. Thus, they expect to be treated more as equal partners, rather than as non-expert clients. The use of the labels "professional" and "nonprofessional" does not credit parents with the measure of specialized knowledge of particular children, a knowledge which they do possess. Educators have specialized knowledge of children in general. Thus, each are experts in particular fields of knowledge of children, and both fields are essential in the education of any child (Lindle & Boyd, 1991).

Lindle and Boyd's data suggest that parents want to share rather than relinquish responsibility, and that this interest manifests itself in an expectation to be treated as equal partners in rearing and educating children. Lindle and Boyd (1991) conclude that:

> these parents' comments warrant serious consideration by professional educators, [and that] educators need to reconceptualize and transform the character and expression of their professionalism. We need a new professionalism that recognizes the need for a balanced relationship with parents, one that emphasizes nurturant and positive affective relationships as well as rational, cognitive goals. (p. 336)

Over the past ten years, Joyce Epstein, from John Hopkins University in Maryland, has been one of the major researchers in the field of parent-school relationships. In the early 1980s, Epstein pointed out that little research had been done to link specific teachers' or schools' practices with the parents who experience them. Furthermore, there had been limited attempts to measure differences in attitudes and reactions of parents whose children are in classrooms of teachers with different philosophies and practices of parent involvement. A major study (Epstein, 1986), which consisted of questionnaires from parents of 1,269 students in Maryland and 82 teachers, found that there was a high degree of similarity between parent experiences and teacher practices:

> Parents ... responded favorably to programs that stressed the cooperation of schools and families to help their children succeed in school. Teachers who included the family in the children's education were recognized by parents for their efforts and were rated higher than other teachers on interpersonal and teaching skills.... Parents' reports [also] suggest that teachers control the flow of information to parents. By limiting communications and collaborative activities, teachers reinforce the boundaries that separate the two institutions. (Epstein, 1986, p. 293)

Other findings from Epstein's research support theories of teaching effectiveness that assume that teachers and parents share responsibility for instructing and socializing students, and that parents can help teachers and students meet school goals (Epstein, 1987). From her studies of teachers' and schools' techniques for involving parents in their children's educational program, as well as the effects of different practices on parents and students, Epstein has identified six types of parent involvement that can help families and schools to fulfill their shared responsibilities for children's learning and development:

Type 1: Basic obligations of families (providing positive home conditions that support learning and behavior).

Type 2: Basic obligations of schools (communicating with families about school programs and children's progress).

Type 3: Parent involvement at the school (volunteer-type activities).

Type 4: Parent involvement in learning activities at home (teachers requesting and guiding parents to monitor and assist their own children at home).

Type 5: Parent involvement in decision-making, governance, and advocacy (participatory roles for parents in school councils, committees, site management teams, etc.).

Type 6: Collaboration and exchange with community organizations.

Recent studies (Epstein & Dauber, 1991) indicate that these types of parent involvement are significantly but modestly interrelated. Schools with more difficult components of parent involvement (such as learning activities at home) tend to have the easier ones (like communication) in place. There is considerable flexibility and unpredictability in which types of involvement are strongly implemented in schools, although elementary schools were found to have stronger, more positive, and more comprehensive parent involvement programs than middle or high schools.

Epstein and Dauber (1991) also found that most teachers believe that they are stronger supporters of parent involvement than are the other teachers in their school. As Epstein and Dauber point out, this is a logical inconsistency, and indicates a lack of common understanding among educators concerning attitudes on parent participation in the schools. Teachers in their research also say that parents are not strong supporters of parent involvement, but surveys of parents in the same schools contradict these beliefs. Epstein and Dauber (1991) conclude that educators may create false or exaggerated discrepancies between themselves and others about parent involvement. The research work carried out by Epstein and Dauber (1991)

suggests that home-school relations are modifiable, and are primarily mediated by educators.

Although teachers and parents rated each other more positively when the teacher used frequent parent involvement practices (Epstein, 1987), Type 4 is the type that leads to the greatest difference in terms of student achievement. Earlier studies (Becker & Epstein, 1982) also found that teachers who organized the frequent use of parent involvement were able to get good results from all parents, not just those who are traditionally thought to be helpful to teachers and to children. Summarizing the results of studies of variations in school practices, Epstein (1988) concludes that we have learned several important things about involving parents:

1. School and family connections must take a developmental course. There are different ways to involve parents during different stages of their children's development and schooling.

2. Families are changing, but all families struggle with limited time. Epstein's research found that it was the teachers' practices (rather than the education, marital status, or work place of parents) that made the difference in whether parents were productive partners with schools in their children's education.

3. Schools that are similar may differ in their parent involvement practices.

4. Parent involvement requires "site specific" development and leadership. Programs must be tailored to the experiences, current practices, and school leadership.

5. Family requests for involvement are constant. Parents in all types of schools and at all grade levels express the need for clear communication about their children's attendance, behavior, academic progress, the curriculum, and how to help their children at home.

In an article in the 1992 Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Epstein summarizes much of her research, and that of others in the past decade:

> During the past decade, new perceptions have recognized the mutual interests and overlapping influence of schools and families, and the roles that schools must play to develop and maintain partnerships with students' families. (Epstein, 1992, p. 1139)

As she talks about how her own thinking about parent-school relationships has evolved, Epstein (1992 1994) says that she believes that **school and family partnerships** is a better term than either **parent involvement** or **home-school relations** for several reasons. First, the term "partnership" emphasizes that families and schools share major responsibilities for children's education, and is a broader, more inclusive concept than "involvement." In addition to recognizing the school as an equal in the partnership, the term recognizes the important potential influence of all family members and all family structures; it also allows students to join the partnership as communicators with and for their own families and schools. Furthermore, partnership implies a formal alliance and contractual agreement to work toward shared goals and to share the benefits of mutual investments.

Over the past three years, another group of researchers at Simon Fraser University (Coleman, Collinge, Seifert and Tabin) has developed an intervention study "intended to identify the major attitudinal elements amongst parents, teachers, and students which influence triadic collaboration to facilitate student learning" (Coleman & Tabin, 1992, p. 1). Coleman and Tabin (1992) define collaboration as "that form of parent involvement with schools and teachers which is focused upon instructional issues; the outcome of collaboration is the co-production of learning. It also refers to an instructional relationship between teachers and students, or students and parents, which is part of general collaboration" (p. 2). The researchers chose to focus their study on the upper elementary years, based on reviews that suggest that teacher-parent collaboration is particularly important during the transition period from elementary to junior high.

This study, called the Co-Production of Learning Project, began with the assumption that in order to improve schools, the relationships between teachers, parents, and students must be changed to render them more satisfying to all parties. Using an "inside-out" (web) model of school improvement, Coleman et al (1992) postulate that the classroom occupies the center of the web, where the vital work of schooling is carried out. Since what goes on in the classroom is critical to school effectiveness, they hypothesize that the relationships between teacher, parent(s), and student are also critical. Their research, which uses a four-year, multi-site, case-study approach, is showing that certain aspects of teacher practice have a strong impact upon parent attitudes, and that improving schools requires attention to these "powerful attitudinal levers of change" (Coleman, Collinge, & Seifert, 1992). The study uses both quantitative analyses of survey responses, and qualitative analyses of interview data. One of the major findings of the survey data is that parent (and student) attitudes towards school are a function of the parents' and students' perceptions of two teacher activities: **collaboration** with students in classrooms and **willingness to communicate** with parents regarding instructional and other issues. Another finding is that teachers must "permit" parent collaboration (Coleman & Tabin, 1992); that is, they must realize the importance of teacher invitation, legitimizing, facilitating, and encouraging parent collaboration as part of their roles as teachers. However, there is little evidence in their data that teachers are presently doing this; most classrooms are not characterized by strong positive relationships with parents (Coleman & Tabin, 1992). These findings support those of Epstein (1992), that teacher interaction with parents is influential in shaping parent perceptions of the teacher and of the school. From the qualitative data, Coleman and Tabin (1992) also report three emerging themes: (1) parents seek participation, need information, and react angrily when teachers regard this as interference; (2) parents seek more information than is typically available to them;

(3) in classrooms, parents expect children to be treated respectfully and as collaborators in learning.

In another paper reporting on the findings of this same study, Collinge and Coleman (1992) include some of the parents' suggestions for developing closer ties between themselves and their children's teachers, and for placing parents in a better position to promote their children's learning:

- Parents would appreciate being advised when a child is encountering difficulties, and having the teacher ask for specific help.
- Some parents would appreciate the opportunity to observe in their child's classroom.
- Parents would like more personal contact with their child's teacher.
- Parents would appreciate more information regarding specific curricular items (math in particular).
- Finally, parents express a need for teacher sensitivity to individual student feelings and needs.

Collinge and Coleman (1992) note that they see the classroom as the center of the "web of influences" around effective schools. What happens in the classroom affects student achievement and teacher professional satisfaction:

> For both to prosper, we argue that genuine collaboration between parents, students, and teachers is critical. It requires the abandonment of the kind of professionalism that thrives on mystification and social distance, and the empowerment of parents through sharing vital curricular and instructional knowledge. (p. 24)

Coleman et al (1992) reject the concept of parents as "clients" of the school, which they believe implies an arm's-length relationship. They also see the notion of parents as clients as inherently at odds with the notion of collaboration, which they believe is the more desirable relationship between schools and parents. Instead, they describe parents and students as participants in the school community, and believe that "parents will have more influence, and will be more satisfied with the schools, if they are perceived as partners rather than as consumers or adversaries" (Coleman et al, 1992).

Home-School Collaboration from a Counselling/Psychology Perspective

School psychology, like psychology in general, was founded with a focus on the individual (Doherty & Perkay, 1992). In addition, school psychology has always been concerned with the ecology of the individual child as represented by the school, and school psychologists have always understood the importance of the child's family environment. However, it has only been in the last ten years that more systematic attention has been paid to how school psychologists can work with families (Anderson, 1983; Doherty & Perkay, 1992). These writers have been promoting a "systems approach" to thinking about schools and families, because this approach offers a way of understanding the complex dynamics between families and schools, and provides a way of promoting positive changes (Anderson, 1983). For example, when parents create too much distance from the child's school, the challenge for the school psychologist is to search for an understanding of the family dynamics and the family-school dynamics, and to be alert for future openings toward collaboration:

> The school psychologist who uses a systems perspective focuses on the parents' inaccessibility as occurring within a transactional field

> that involves actions by the school and probably other community systems. (Doherty & Perkay, 1992, p. 6)

Using the systems theory approach can help us to understand the "interactional dance" between families and the school; as Doherty and Perkay (1992) state, if everyone is seen as "part of the problem," everyone can also become part of the solution. This represents a significant shift in roles for the school psychologist, one that moves away from the role of the "expert professional" who works at arm's length from families:

> The family systems approach... is fundamentally social and collaborative. It involves a different paradigm for practice... If school psychologists can provide leadership for involving families in an inviting, collaborative way in the care and education of children, the role of the school psychologist will be transformed. (p. 17)

Conoley (1987) presents a levels model in terms of a school psychologist's involvement with families, focusing on "progressively greater positive interdependence between family and school" (p. 191).

Weiss and Edwards (1992) report on a Family-School Collaboration Project established in over 50 New York City schools over the past ten years. The Family-School Collaboration Project began in 1981, as a response to problems that therapists at the Ackerman Institute for family therapy were seeing in the school referrals. Generally, parents were perceiving the referrals as a way of the school "blaming" them for the child's difficulties, and consequently tended to either not show up for their sessions, or terminate after only one or two sessions. Weiss and Maslow, the co-founders of the Project, suggested that "family-school problem-solving meetings" would be more productive than family therapy sessions. The message to parents was that children can only be helped when the family and the

school work together. Weiss and Edwards (1992) believe that many mental health professionals, when intervening in larger systems like the schools, "fall into the trap of pulling the identified unit (e.g., child, family) out of the system in which it resides, rather than recognizing that the child's or family's patterns of behavior are integrally connected to that system. Thus, the *family-school system* is the unit of intervention" (p. 221).

In spite of the individual successes of the "problem-solving meetings," Weiss and Maslow soon realized (Weiss & Edwards, 1992) that a more efficient way to bring about significant change was to examine the way schools and families developed their relationships from the beginning. They began to develop a wider repertoire of school-wide activities called "climate-building activities." Weiss and Edwards (1992) state that the three prerequisites for success of the Family-School Collaboration projects were: (a) the principal's commitment to family-school collaboration; (b) the selection of a coordinating committee that represents administrators, teachers, and parents; and (c) the designation of a family-school coordinator, a role that can be played by the school psychologist. However, they note that the current roles of school psychologists must change in order for this to happen, since typically, psychologists work with students and families who have been referred to them by others and whose problems have been defined by others. As family-school coordinators, psychologists would take on the roles of consultant and facilitator; rather than work with students or parents alone, they would work conjointly with students, parents, teachers, and other school staff. They would also be applying their psychological training and knowledge of child development to promote collaboration between schools and families.

Epstein (1992) also suggests that school psychologists have the talents, skills, and knowledge to assume a leadership role in promoting stronger family-school connections, since they have:

- knowledge of child development, and an understanding of how children benefit from coordinated efforts of the many influences in their lives;
- an appreciation of and experience with "systems" approaches to preventing and solving problems; and
- an awareness of the distinctions between prevention and treatment activities to encourage healthy child and adolescent development. (p. 499)

Epstein (1992) proposes a "paradigm shift" for the role of school psychologist, from being the "school psychologist" to being the "psychologist of the school" (p. 502). She recognizes that some of the tasks that school psychologists presently carry out, such as crisis intervention, testing and other psychological services, would still need to be carried out. However, her belief is that there are compelling reasons for psychologists to spend up to half of their time promoting and maintaining psychologically healthy schools, as they affect all students, all teachers, and all families "a basic building block for student success and for a positive and productive school climate" (p. 507).

Epstein (1992) notes that in 1980s, the work of school psychologists was extended by a focus on systems approaches, with a greater attention paid to children in context, and by adding a family orientation. She believes that this approach should now be extended to communicating with and involving all families, not just those of children with special needs, or children with emotional or behavioral difficulties.

Summary

There is a definite trend in our society towards increasing the rights of parents to make educational decisions concerning their children, along with a trend that emphasizes the importance of parents and educators working together to meet

the educational needs of the children in their care. I undertook this study in an attempt to understand how parents and educators describe the current reality in terms of parent-school collaboration. Furthermore, I wanted to learn more about their hopes or "vision" for the future in terms of the relationship between parents and the school.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Methodology Overview

I chose a qualitative, human science research approach (Patton, 1990; Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; van Manen, 1990), because of its congruency with the topic and my own personal beliefs about how we can best learn about another person's perspective. This approach has allowed me to have the most direct understanding of the participants' experiences, and has also made it possible for them to share with me some of the "insights" they think they have gained as a result of these experiences.

Personal Perspective

Patton (1990) proposes that the qualitative researcher must take on an attitude of "empathic neutrality," which he defines as a "neutral non-judgmental stance toward whatever content may emerge" (p. 41). This perspective is neither easy to acquire nor to maintain, since the researcher must "become aware of and deal with selective perception, personal biases, and theoretical predispositions" (Patton, 1990, p. 56). The process of doing this is frequently referred to as "bracketing." What follows is my personal attempt at bracketing or obtaining this empathic neutrality, a process that has continued throughout this study.

As I described in detail in Chapter One, the topic of parent-teacher collaboration is one to which I bring over twenty years of experience and reflection. As this research study has progressed, my own beliefs and opinions about the importance of parents and schools developing a collaborative relationship have become even stronger. I have a strong belief that children benefit when the adults

who are responsible for them know each other, respect each other, and share similar goals and values for the children. Furthermore, I believe that there has been a gradual deterioration in the relationship between parents and teachers, and that many parents experience, as I have, a sense of frustration and hopelessness about being "heard" by the schools. Like Seeley (1981), I also believe that the major responsibility for changing how parents and schools work together rests with the educators, although parents certainly have a part to play in making such changes as well. I think that our society is undergoing a major "paradigm" shift in terms of parents' role in the process of education, and that any major change such as this one is bound to create conflict and uncertainty.

Clearly, my personal and professional experiences, as well as my beliefs about the importance of this topic, resulted in a "double-edged sword" as I carried out this study. On one hand, it enabled me to understand and empathize more readily with each of the participants in the study; on the other hand, I needed to be constantly aware of the biases that these experiences created in me, and to diligently monitor their impact on the research.

Ensuring Trustworthiness and Rigor in the Study

In any qualitative study such as this one, the researcher must find ways of ensuring that the findings can be considered credible (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Patton, 1990; Sandelowski, 1986). "Rigor" is the term that applies to the process of planning and conducting the research and analysis, whereas "trustworthiness" is related to the data, the results, and the conclusions reached by the researcher. Thus, rigor of the research is a prerequisite to establishing trustworthiness of the findings.

Patton (1990) suggests that the credibility issue for qualitative inquiry depends on three distinct but related elements:

1. A fundamental, philosophical belief in a qualitative approach;
2. The credibility of the researcher; and
3. Rigorous techniques and methods for gathering and analyzing data.

Beginning with the fundamental belief in a qualitative approach, the researcher must believe that there are multiple perspectives from which to consider behaviors, emotions, and thoughts. With respect to the subjectivity of the study, there is no question that the researcher in this study is the "measuring" instrument. However, according to Bogdan and Biklen (1992), researchers can transcend some of their own biases by being aware of them, and by being as accurate and comprehensive as possible in analyzing the data. The following is a brief account of some of the strategies and techniques I have used to enhance the trustworthiness of this research project. First of all, with respect to the **belief system and researcher credibility:**

- I took a graduate course in qualitative research, in which I was involved in readings, discussions, and a pilot study that gave me first-hand experience in using this approach.
- I kept a reflective journal, where I documented my thoughts and beliefs about using this paradigm, as well as my professional and personal biases and working assumptions.
- I selected a topic with which I have had extensive professional and personal experience, and I was able to bring some of that experience to the study, but was careful not to share my own personal beliefs with the participants.
- I documented through field notes changes in my thoughts and attitudes toward this topic.

- I kept a detailed "audit trail," documenting the process and products of the research.
- I interacted closely with the participants during the interviews, but did not become over-involved with them.

Secondly, in order to ensure **methodological credibility**:

- I selected participants who could represent various viewpoints (as parents, a teacher, a counsellor, and a principal), who had an ability to express themselves well, and who were willing to share their thoughts and experiences.
- I tape-recorded the interviews, and transcribed each interview verbatim.
- I double-checked all transcriptions for errors and/or omissions.
- I paraphrased and coded all the data from the interviews, and carried out "member checks" to ensure accuracy of my interpretations.
- I worked with a colleague during the coding process, to ensure that my method of analysis was credible.
- I made use of a constant comparative method to sort data.
- I included direct quotes in the report of the findings, in order to substantiate claims and interpretations.

In an article entitled Rigor or rigor mortis: The problem of rigor in qualitative research revisited, Sandelowski (1993) suggests that the best test of rigor in qualitative work is whether or not the researcher has managed to create "the evocative, true-to-life, and meaningful portraits, stories, and landscapes of human experience" (p. 1). This was my goal in presenting the information I received from each of the participants in a case study format at the beginning of Chapter Four.

Another point that Sandelowski (1993) makes is that the typically narrative nature of interview data makes the problem of determining accuracy of meaning and intention "a deeply theoretical and moral one." According to Sandelowski, (1993, p. 5), stories that people tell in interviews are themselves constantly changing, since they represent their efforts to order, find meaning in, and even live with the events in their lives. This is indeed the case for the stories that my participants shared with me; I have attempted to present them as clearly as possible as they want them told.

Ethical Considerations

In accordance with University of Alberta policy, an application was made to the Department of Educational Psychology Ethics Review Committee, and the research procedures received the Committee's approval on April 7, 1994.

When the participants were first approached to have the purpose of the study explained to them, they were given a copy of the proposal and any questions they had were answered. They were asked to sign a consent form (See Appendix A for a copy of the consent form), and were assured that consent forms would be kept in a secured location, separate from the data so that names would not be associated with the tapes or transcripts.

Participants were assured that their participation in the study was totally voluntary, and that their identity would be kept confidential in any of the reports written as a result of this study. In order to do this, I invited each participant to select a pseudonym. I changed the names (and in some cases, the gender) of people that the participants referred to during the interviews. When I felt that the credibility of the data would not be influenced, I have also deliberately omitted some information that I felt might identify one of the participants. The school's identity was also kept confidential, and the name of the school has been changed for this reason. Participants were also assured that if they did not wish to answer some

questions, they could indicate this and we would proceed to another question. Finally, they were told that they could withdraw from the study at any time, without prejudice.

Selection of Participants

As I was making a decision regarding the participants in this study, I was aware that the most basic qualification is that participants have "salient experiences of the phenomenon in their everyday worlds" (Becker, 1986, p. 105). Each of the participants in this study have had direct experiences in terms of parent-school collaboration.

One of the goals of this study was to explore the diversity in terms of participants' perspectives on parent-school collaboration; consequently, I chose to interview a principal, a teacher, a counsellor and two parents. I also decided to include two parents in the study rather than just one, in order to provide some balance between the school/parent perspectives. Each of the participants was either a staff member of Holy Spirit Elementary School, or had children who attended the school. The decision to select all of the participants from one school was made in the hope that there would be some "common ground" in terms of experiences.

I knew the principal, **Stance**, from previous professional connections. Although I had never spoken to him specifically about his thoughts on parent-school collaboration, I knew him to be an articulate, outspoken, and enthusiastic administrator. I had a sense that he would have some strong beliefs about the topic, as well as a willingness to share his thoughts and opinions honestly and openly with me. Furthermore, from having seen him interact with others in a number of situations, I thought that he was himself a very "collaborative" person.

Having received permission and encouragement from the Superintendent of Schools to pursue this study at Holy Spirit School, I contacted Stance directly, and

explained to him the purpose of my research. Stance responded enthusiastically, and said that he would be pleased to participate in the study, and to assist me in the selection of the other participants.

There was no question as to who I would interview for the counselor, since the school only has one full-time counsellor, **Bernard**. I asked Stance to assist me in selecting a teacher, according to my criteria which included: (a) experience with the topic, (b) ability to articulate thoughts and experiences on the topic, and (c) willingness to spend the required time with me. Stance suggested that I approach **Clare**, a grade three teacher at the school.

After meeting with Bernard and Clare to discuss the research proposal, and to find out if they were interested in participating in the study, I asked each of them to identify one parent they had "worked with" over the past year, keeping in mind the above criteria. I did this in the hope that there would be some cross-referencing of data, i.e., that the parents would refer to similar situations that the educators did. Bernard suggested **Denae**, and Clare referred me to **Anne**. Both Bernard and Clare made the initial contact with each parent, to make sure that they were interested in participating in the study. Once they let me know that both Denae and Anne were indeed interested, I contacted each of them by telephone to make arrangements for our first interviews.

Collection of Data: Interviews

I chose to use interviews as the primary basis for this study, in order to obtain as "rich" data as possible. According to Patton (1990), the interview format allows the opportunity to develop greater rapport and openness between the researcher and the participants in the study. The interviews in this research were semi-structured (Patton, 1990). I developed an interview guide, but encouraged each of the participants to digress and expand on their thoughts on the topic of

parent-school collaboration. Whenever it seemed necessary, I asked some "probing" questions, in order to make sure that I understood each participants' viewpoints clearly.

The interview guide has two slightly different versions, one that I used with the educators, and the other one with the parents. (See Appendix B for a copy of the interview guides.) During each interview, I also became aware of the impact of my questions; I found that one of the questions that led to the "richest" data was: "Is there anything else that I need to know about you personally in order to really understand your thoughts about parents and schools working together?"

Each of the participant was interviewed twice, the first an open-ended interview, and the second a validation of my interpretations. My intention during the interviews was to be as non-directive as possible, to avoid influencing the participants' responses. The first participant to be interviewed was Stance, the principal, followed by Bernard, the counsellor, Clare, the teacher, and finally Anne and Denae, the parents. With the exception of Stance, who was interviewed in late February, 1994, all of the other first interviews were held during a two-week period in May, 1994.

The first interview with each participant was approximately one hour in length. Before the first interview, I spent about ten minutes establishing rapport, informing the participant about the nature of the research and answering any questions, and gaining the consent in written form. Then the tape-recorder was turned on for the main phase of the interview. The participants knew that they would have an opportunity to review the transcripts of the interviews, and make any clarifications or additions they wished.

During this first interview, I asked each of the participants to talk to me about one of their **recent positive** experiences of home-school collaboration, as well as one of their **recent negative** experiences with collaboration. I also asked

them to define or describe parent-school collaboration, and to identify the barriers that they saw in terms of developing this collaboration. Finally, I asked them to talk to me about their "vision" of parent-school collaboration--what they would ideally like to see happening.

The second interviews, which were held after the transcribed first interviews had been analyzed, were also approximately one hour in length. The purpose of the second interview was to ask the participants to check the transcripts for accuracy, clarify meanings, to add to the ideas that they had shared during the first interview, and to validate my interpretations of the interviews. All five participants basically agreed with my interpretations of what they had said, although most people corrected or expanded on at least a few points. All changes were recorded directly on the transcribed interview, in the form of margin notes.

Before the final draft of this thesis was written, participants also had an opportunity to read the sections of Chapter 4 that pertained to them, and to see how I interpreted their experiences and thoughts on the topic of parent-school collaboration.

Analysis of Data

Individual Analysis

The data consisted of the five taped interviews, the written transcriptions of these interviews, field notes and journal reflections. In some instances, the participants made some very meaningful statements immediately after the tape recorder was turned off. In such cases, I entered this data into my journal, which I used as a secondary data source. After each interview, I also dictated my field notes, consisting mainly of reflections on the interview and insights regarding the possible interpretations of the data. These field notes were transcribed shortly after

they were recorded, and provided another secondary data source in the analysis of the material.

After each of the first interviews, I personally transcribed the interview verbatim within a day or two of the interview. Having completed each transcription, I listened again to each interview, checking with the typed transcription line-by-line for total accuracy.

Before beginning with the analysis, I first read through each interview thoroughly several times, to get an overall sense of the main themes and issues for each participant. I paid close attention to the statements that were repeated, and listened to the tape again to get a sense of the participant's tone and expression. Then each interview was broken down into meaning units, and each unit was carefully paraphrased (first level abstraction). Working with the help of a colleague, I then assigned a "tag" or label to each meaning unit (second-level abstraction).

These tags were then clustered together into groups or topics for analysis, in order to develop the main themes for each participant (third-level abstraction). It is at this point that I returned for my second interview with each participant, in order to validate my analysis by seeing if each one agreed with it.

Overall Analysis

After analyzing each interview individually, I began a comparative analysis. First I looked for themes that were specific to parents and specific to educators; secondly, I looked for some of the overall themes or issues ("topics") that applied to all the interviews. Each topic was analyzed in detail. The findings are presented in Chapter Four, first in case study format, which gives the reader an opportunity to meet each of the participants, and to know their particular context and understandings. In order to write this section of the thesis, I re-arranged the order

of sentences, but was careful to use the exact words of the participants at all times. The only changes I made were grammatical ones, in order to ensure that sentences or thoughts could be easier read, but the meaning was never changed. Left to stand on their own, the stories provide the best possible "window" into each person's perspective on parent-school collaboration.

In this first part of Chapter Four, I also decided to present the parents' voices first, and then the educators. This was a choice that I made very deliberately, based on my belief in the importance of hearing the parents' perspective (and which I believe is often not heard by the educators). The second part of Chapter Four is an interpretation of the overall themes and issues that emerged from the interviews.

Introduction of the Participants

The research study included five participants, all of whom are connected to Holy Spirit School, which is briefly described below. The following is a brief description of each of the participants:

Stance, a principal. Stance has been the principal at Holy Spirit School for the past five years. He is married, has two children, and has been working as a teacher and administrator for over 20 years.

Bernard, a counsellor. Bernard has been the school counsellor at Holy Spirit for 17 years, and has been working for the school district for 23 years. He is also married, and has three children.

Clare, a grade three teacher. Clare is in her early forties, and has been teaching elementary school for 20 years. She has also worked as a district office consultant for two years. She is married to a high school teacher, and has three daughters.

Anne, a parent of two children (Julie, grade 5 and Justin, grade 3). Anne has a son in Clare's class this year, and Clare suggested her as a parent participant for the study. Anne is a nurse and a single parent, and has raised both children on her own since they were very young.

Denae, a parent of three children (Veronique, grade 5, Melanie, grade 4, and Lisa, grade 1). Denae's name was suggested for this study by Bernard. Denae is a full-time homemaker, and her husband is a self-employed businessman.

Description of the School

Holy Spirit School is a Catholic elementary school, located in a suburb of a large city in the province of Alberta. The school was originally opened in 1959, but has undergone extensive structural changes over the past 35 years. In the 1993-94 school year, the school had an enrollment of 588 students. There are 344 students from grades one to six; the 244 remaining students are enrolled in ECS (Early Childhood Services or kindergarten) programs. The reason for this large number of ECS students is that Holy Spirit School has been designated as the "district site" for ECS programs. All students of ECS age within the district are bused to Holy Spirit School. Due to the large number of ECS students housed at the school, there are significant numbers of students with special needs. The school has a Preschool (i.e., pre-kindergarten age) program for children with special needs.

The school staff includes a principal and a vice-principal who both have some teaching responsibilities in addition to administrative ones, a full-time counsellor, 26 teachers, 19 support and clerical staff, and three custodians.

Holy Spirit School has a Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) which meets on a monthly basis. According to a "constitution" that has not been revised for several years, the membership of the PAC consists of all parents and staff, and all are "welcome" to the meetings. The constitution states that "a core group shall

consist of parents and staff who are willing and who are available for extra responsibilities." There are no elections or appointments to this group; it is strictly a "volunteer" group. Consequently, parents who attend the PAC meetings do not necessarily feel any responsibility to represent anyone other than themselves.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Part One: Participants in the Research

1. Anne, who wants to be heard

Anne is the parent of two children, Julie (age 11) in grade 5, and Justin (age 9) in grade 3. Anne works as a nurse in a large hospital and with the local Board of Health, and on the day we agreed to meet for our first interview, she was scheduled to work a four-hour shift beginning at lunch time. She offered to come to my house in the morning to be interviewed. Upon meeting her, I was struck with her no-nonsense manner, and her willingness to share her thoughts with me. Within the first few minutes of the interview, Anne introduced herself, displaying the strength, honesty, and directness that characterize her best:

> I'm a single parent, and have raised both children on my own right from birth. When Justin was two and a half, he was diagnosed with leukemia, and he had radiation to his brain, as part of his treatment... and the concern was that because his brain was not mature, because he was under three, that he may have some difficulties at school at a later date.
>
> I was a student nurse when Justin was on treatment, so when he was diagnosed I took a six-month leave, and then I went back to school and finished my nursing while he was on treatment for the rest of the two years... And I graduated, and he came off treatments. It was a very difficult time. I look back at that time, and I think, how did I do that? Fortunately, I've had a lot of support from my family.
>
> Both my children have attended Holy Spirit School since kindergarten. With Julie, my first child, I never felt an importance to communicating with the school; I always looked at it from at a time when I was in school, like, I'm the parent, they're the educators, and they're separate roles... Because Julie was just in school, sailing along, and not having any problems... But because of Justin's medical history, I knew that there could be some learning disabilities, and I thought... as I spent more time talking to the teachers, and the principal, and the counselor, I thought, it's a

> relationship, it's important. I'm his parent, and they are the educators, but we have a vested interest in this child, and we have to work together to make sure that his education goes as best as it can be.

As with all the participants in this research, I asked Anne to begin by talking to me about her thoughts about parents and schools working together. It quickly became clear that Anne's experience with Justin has made her very aware of the importance of parent-school collaboration, and that she has seen herself as her son's advocate since his first year in school:

> What the radiation and other treatment did to him was, it changed his behavior. He became attention deficit disordered, secondary to the radiation. They've tried to tell me that he could have been before, but I said no, I know what he was like before, and he wasn't... They gave him toxic chemicals, both in his blood and in his brain, the radiation, and I know that changed him. So his behavior was different, he's very volatile, moody, impulsive, aggressive... I felt that once in kindergarten, it was important for me to communicate with the school, that his behavior was a result of his treatments.... that these children experience some typical learning deficits. Also while it might not be manifested at an early age, it can happen over time, it can happen at any time. I just felt it was important that they realize this.
>
> My relationship with the school has been, at the beginning, it was a rather difficult one, in that... I felt that because they knew this was a child at risk, that they should be proactive in their education, and provide him with assistance early on. But of course, because of finances, they're reactive, they wait for the problems, and then they deal with them, so... I was at their door a lot, making sure that they were looking out for him.

For Anne, the "negative" story she relates in terms of her relationship with the school turns out to be the story of her son's early school experiences. Anne felt that Justin was a victim of his disease and of the treatments; she felt frustrated because she thought neither the doctors nor the school were willing to recognize that his problems were a result of his treatments. She describes her increasing

disappointment with the school, and the events that led her to take her concerns to a level beyond the school.

> When Justin came off treatment, I realized that he had been affected by the radiation and the chemotherapy, and I felt that he was a victim. I had the medical doctors now telling me, "Oh, we don't know if he would have been this way anyway," and I had the school telling me, "Well, there's other kids that have learning problems like this too,"... but I was a parent who felt, no one's admitting that radiation and chemotherapy did this to him, caused him to be this way. He's having problems interacting with his peers, and it's affecting his esteem... I mean there wasn't a moment in the day that he wasn't in trouble, and I felt that he was a victim. I had a lot of anger, and frustration.
>
> At first, because the school was being reactive and not proactive, I actually told [the principal] that I wasn't happy with things... Justin was in a grade one class with a group of children that were very difficult, with an inexperienced teacher. I just felt that wasn't the best learning environment for Justin... and [the principal] felt that it was O.K., but I wasn't happy with that decision... I wanted Justin in a quieter learning environment. I had submitted lots of articles to the school on the side effects of radiation, tons of articles... And I didn't feel that they were taking this as seriously as I wanted them to. I told him [the principal] that I was going to take it to the superintendent of schools.
>
> So I did, I sent a letter expressing my frustrations... my concern that the school was not giving Justin the individualized attention that he needed. The school felt that he was coping, and that he didn't need the assistance, and I felt that coping's not good enough. There's a child here who has difficulties, and the learning atmosphere was not a good one for him. I had talked to the teacher, to the principal, and it wasn't going anywhere... because they still said that he was coping. And my frustration was, "yes, he's coping, but he's been through enough, I don't want him to just cope, I want him to have more attention," and they didn't feel that they could provide that, so... I sent the letter.
>
> After I sent the letter, there was a meeting with the principal, the Director of Student Services [from the district office], and myself. I can't remember if the teacher and the counsellor were there or not. But we met and discussed the letter, and my frustration, and I think we ended up agreeing to disagree.

From Anne's perspective, this meeting did not result in any consensus, or agreement on the school's part to make any of the changes she was asking for. It seemed to her that the school officials listened politely to her concerns, but told her

that they didn't agree that changes were needed, nor could they make any changes to Justin's school program. However, soon after that meeting, Anne saw that changes did begin to occur for Justin at school.

> But not long after, Justin was placed in a resource room. And after that, it seemed, things kind of fell in place. The next year, when he was in grade two, I received a phone call from his teachers asking for my permission for Justin to receive language arts instruction for three periods each morning, in a small group with an ancillary teacher. I said, yes, absolutely. So there were more opportunities for him to have quieter instruction... Then in May of grade two, the teacher felt that Justin could move back into the classroom. I was somewhat alarmed that they were removing him from that small group, but after talking to them and finding out that... they wanted him back in the whole class to see if he was ready for grade three... I mean, it improved our relationship, because when they made changes that I didn't agree with, I had to find out why. And if after talking to them, I felt comfortable, then I could agree with what they were saying...

However, Anne never knew for sure if these changes occurred as a result of her letter to the Superintendent's office, and the meeting that was subsequently held.

> At the meeting, I thought, what did I accomplish, we communicated, and we agreed to disagree... But not too long after, things changed... And I was upset that they made that change, that at the meeting they couldn't admit that, I'm still not sure why he was put in there. I'm not sure if he was put in there because I had raised a fuss, or if he really needed to be put in there.

The following situation is the one that Anne uses as an example of a positive experience she has had in working with the school. The most important thing for Anne seems to be that she now feels she has reached a point where she can trust her son's teacher, and the school, to look out for him and to be proactive in terms of meeting his educational needs.

> The other thing that happened [this year in grade three], Justin's teacher phoned me and said that Justin's having difficulty in Language Arts, and would I like to have him in Resource Room...

> And, just right away, you know, I commended her and praised her for assessing that Justin needed that, and I said, "By all means, put him in there,"... I was just really pleased that... and that's part of that trusting... is the teacher going to pick up on his needs... I sent her a letter the next day, thanking her for noticing that he needed assistance, and for phoning me and asking me how I felt about it. I kind of went to bed with a feeling of, yes, I worked hard in the last three years, and I might have upset a few people, but it's working...

Although these changes had been occurring for Justin at the school, Anne talks about two significant "turning points" that also had an impact on her relationship with the school. She went to see a personal counsellor, where she finally had an opportunity to talk about her anger over what had happened to her son, an opportunity to have her feelings heard and validated. She also was referred to a psychologist from the local Cancer Institute, who assessed Justin and later became involved with Justin's school program.

> She became, I guess, Justin's advocate, she became involved in the school. And now, she's the one that communicates with them... She talks to the school, and educates them. And I find that, and I think that [Justin's teacher] does too, that having her has made a difference... She kind of steps in for me, and the difference... [Justin's teacher] explained the other day when we were talking about it, she said, "It kind of validates what you're saying, it's not just a parent saying, it's somebody who is part of a medical team who is validating what you've been telling us..."

Anne describes parent-school collaboration in terms of parents and schools communicating and working together as partners. She also has a strong sense of the link between her child's life at home and his life at school. She defines collaboration as a relationship that develops over time, where both parties work together for the benefit of the child.

> It's important for me to know what he's doing at school, because it will have a tie-over when he comes home from school.... And I can't be there to supervise him, or to control that, but I need to know, I mean, his life doesn't end when school's over, and his home life doesn't end when he goes to school. It's important that we work together... Because things that happen at home can affect

> his schooling, and things that happen at school can affect his evening. So, I think it's really important to know that it's a partnership, that it's not that you're the educator and I'm the parent, and there's a line there at 3:30, and at 8:30 in the morning... that we have to work together.
>
> It's a relationship where both parties have to work as partners, for the children that they have there. It's an ongoing relationship, I mean, it doesn't just happen in grade one,... it's, as schools change, and as children change, and as family dynamics change, that relationship has to...

Anne recognizes the problem that arises because of the conflict between parents' individual concerns for their children, and the school's need to be concerned with the entire student group. However, she wants the school to acknowledge that her children are the most important things to her, and that their education is very important.

> The children in the school are loved by parents who want the best for their children... And, I just see that my interest and concern for Justin is probably 90%... and I hate to put a percentage on it, but I'm sure it's stronger than the interest the school has in him... I mean, they have 350 kids, so their investment in that child's education is not the same as mine, my investment.... I appreciate that, and I don't want Justin to be the only one in the school and to have their undivided attention, but they need to know how important he is to me.
>
> What I'm trying to say is just that their interest in my children is going to be different than my interest, and they need to respect that, and appreciate that... And if I come to the school and request certain things, they need to know that it's not because I think they're incompetent, or they can't do the job... So they don't take comments as an affront to their pride, or whatever...

When asked what she thinks schools can do to promote home-school collaboration, Anne talks about the importance of the attitudes of educators towards parents. She feels that the educators' attitude was that she should trust them "automatically," simply because of their profession.

> I can remember a time when I felt a little resentment on their part that I was being proactive. What was coming across... was that, they're in the education business, and I should trust them, ... I should trust

> that they know what they're doing... And, I resented that a little bit, because I thought, yeah, you are an educator and I'm an R.N., we have different backgrounds, and I can't say where Justin is in terms of his education, or if he's having difficulties, I can only go by what I think I know... and, they're the educator, but I'm his mother? And, if I know him better than you do, then you should listen to me?
>
> It's not that they don't listen, but I still sense that there's this attitude of, "we're the educators, this is our specialty, and you have to trust us," ... and while I've been able to trust them because I feel he's in a good place, I don't think they should have that attitude. We have to work together as a team, not, we're the educators, and leave the child in our hands.

Anne also thinks that parents need to take a stronger interest in their children's education, and not be intimidated by the educators. She sees that this is beginning to change in our society.

> I know I look at my parents, and I mean, when I grew up, you didn't question what they said, you just went with it, and... I think now it has to be different... They're not God, and they don't know everything, and you have to communicate. You might not agree on the same things, but... I think, as a whole, our generation has more education, and we have higher expectations [for the schools], and we are getting involved more, maybe communicating more.

When asked about her vision for parent-school collaboration, Anne talks about how she believes that she is "living her vision" at the school right now:

> I'm comfortable at the school now, and I'm comfortable with the relationship that we have, and... because I've had that meeting with them, I feel that I'd be able to do that again... that I know that they'd receive my concern for Justin different... So I like the way things are going now. I think that they are open to my comments, my suggestions... that they communicate with me, and they have done in the past, and.... while it gives me stress at the time, it's important that I know those things, you know, so... communication is the key, I guess... also the openness.

2. Denae, who wants a voice

Denae is the mother of three daughters. I interviewed her at the kitchen table of her home, over several cups of coffee. Denae welcomed me warmly; she is very interested in the topic of parent-school relationships and, like Anne, she speaks with a lot of candour and emotion about the issues we addressed. Denae talks rapidly, with a lot of energy. This is how Denae introduces herself and her family:

> My husband and I have three daughters: Veronique is 11 and in grade 5, Melanie is 9 and in grade 4, and Lisa will be 7 this month - she's in grade one. All three girls have been at Holy Spirit School since they began their education... So, you know, we've been involved in the school for a length of time. My husband is a self-employed businessman, and has been in a few different businesses since we got married.
>
> Myself, when we were first married, I worked in the capacity of a social worker with the provincial government for a number of years, and in some other capacities too. When I got pregnant with my first child, I went on maternity leave, and then I later resigned. So I've been a stay-at-home Mom for almost 12 years.
>
> I guess the most important thing in our life is our relationship with God and Jesus. Much of our life revolves around our Church, which is not the Catholic Church, but [another Christian religion]. We have been attending that Church since 1989, and most of our involvement in the community is related to our church.

When I ask Denae to talk to me about her thoughts about parents and schools working together, about parent-school collaboration, she immediately begins to talk about how she believes that we are in a time of change.

> I think we're kind of in an exciting time, in terms of opportunities for parents to get involved in schools... because I think that, you know, with the new budget that Klein [the provincial premier] has brought in, and all these cutbacks, that parents are going to be put in the position that they're going to have to become more involved. And I think that's going to open doors for us, and it's going to give parents great freedom to have a greater voice in our schools. And I think it really is an exciting time. I just see great opportunities for more, greater opportunities for people in the school system and the parents to come together and really make a difference... And I am really excited about it, I think it's good.

> I think that parents will be given more, well, freedom... hopefully more rights to make decisions, to really make [a difference]. It's hard to imagine what exactly these changes will be, I don't think anyone's going to know [for a while]...
>
> I see greater opportunity for parents to have a voice, and how our money is spent... You know, I'm not saying really that I'm supporting Klein, and all these cutbacks. Don't misunderstand me there, but I think that there will be some positive, I think that it will sharpen schools. I think Stance [the principal] is keenly aware that he's going to have to market his school, and keep everyone happy. I even see the possibility of us adopting the voucher system, where parents would be given a voucher and say, shop for your school... and I think that would be quite reasonable.

Denae feels that parents haven't had much of a voice in schools until now. She sees that they will have more opportunity in the future to have a real impact. It is obvious right from the start that parents having a "voice" in making decisions about all aspects of education is very important to Denae. She recognizes that this is very much in keeping with who she is herself.

> I'd like to have more say in everything, right from the top down... about everything. You know, I hear from my children, about all these additional courses that are brought in, that, you know, are kind of swept in at our school... and somehow, I just feel like I've had no say in them. I would like a greater say in everything. But I'm very verbal, and I'm very opinionated. So, it's probably just in keeping with my personality.

Denae has clearly given a lot of thought to the relationship between parents and the school. She believes in the importance of parents supporting the school, being very positive, of working closely together.

> I just think it's crucial, you know, you have to have a relationship... It's crucial, it's absolutely crucial, and I think it should be continually nurtured, in whatever opportunities are available. Like I said, I think there's great potential for the schools and the parents to work more closely together now, with all these changes...
>
> I believe in supporting the school, and I believe in setting differences aside, for the betterment of the whole body, and my children... And I do not like confrontation, it's not in my personality.

Denae believes that her relationship with the school is generally a "good and positive" one. She is very appreciative of the good qualities that she sees in the school administration and staff, and the environment that they have created for students. Denae particularly recognizes the important role of the school principal. This is how she describes Holy Spirit School:

> I just look at the school as being very upbeat, and very positive. I see the staff as being really committed, and I look at Stance and [the vice-principal] as being optimistic, you know... Stance, especially, seems to have the gift of encouragement, with a real heart, a real heart for the kids.... And I think that's an attitude that prevails across, to all the different families that come to that school. It's valued, it's supported, and it's encouraged.
>
> And my hat goes off to Stance, because I think it's very true, my husband says you can tell the type of staff by the boss... And I think it's true, you can tell very much what goes on ... behind closed doors.

However, in spite of her admiration for Stance and for the good work that he does, Denae is not convinced that the parents really have an equal voice in making decisions. Like Anne, she feels concerned and upset at times about the attitudes that she perceives are held by the educators:

> Stance always talks about the school as a partnership, you know, and everything... And I think he's sincere in that, but ... sometimes I wonder, if it came down to the bottom line, if it still wouldn't be, "well, we here know best, because we really are the educators, and we're the ones that have gone to all these seminars and conferences, and this is what the literature is saying, and this is, you know..." So, that's the thing I dislike... It's like a partnership as long as we all agree.

When I ask Denae to tell me about some positive experiences she has had in terms of her relationship with the school, she talks first about the interactions she's had over the last few years with Bernard, the counsellor, and also about a very special teacher who has taught two of her daughters. Bernard has been involved in

doing assessment work with each of Denae's children, and each time Denae has felt that Bernard valued her knowledge and opinions.

> Bernard is very approachable, and he's very non-judgmental, and he never makes you feel like he knows more than, you know, he would know more that would be of a deciding factor than what you as a parent would know... Again, he has a real heart for the kids.

The "special teacher" is someone who reminds Denae of a fourth-grade teacher she had herself.

> Monica is wonderful, she cares for her flock... I hope she never loses it, as a young teacher, she just cares about her kids, you know, she wants to set them on fire to learn, and never wanting to miss an opportunity... She's very affirming for the children, and I think she's affirming with the parents, and... she's very caring, and I just really appreciate her, like she's upbeat, and I'm sure there's times when she's at her desk and wonders what she's doing, you know... but I've never left a parent-teacher interview, or ever had a phone call with her, or a chat, without feeling so grateful that she's part of our school, and that, you know, that my two girls have had her...

Denae's "negative example" in terms of collaboration with the school involves a very recent meeting of the Parent Advisory Committee (PAC). She has begun attending the PAC meetings on a regular basis (i.e., every month) for the past year. It is her understanding that any parent can attend these meetings, but she says that the same people tend to show up each month. These "attenders" have not been elected or appointed in any way, and the parents who come are not necessarily representing anyone other than themselves at these meetings. Denae describes what happened at this last meeting:

> The last encounter I had with the school was at a Parent Advisory Committee meeting. They were talking about a parent survey that had gone out [to the parents], and it had come back. It was mostly with regard to the big issue of supervision and safety of kids on the playground, as well as the cost of this supervision. And we were talking about hiring another supervisor, and the cost that would be involved, and what would be our options to not hiring someone... I

> felt that the PAC, which is made up of a handful of regular attenders, was not really, probably, always a very representative voice... I just think a lot of decisions are made without the rest of parent knowing...
>
> And I felt that before we made a decision at the PAC, we should go back to the parents, and say, "look, this is what we've compiled, this is what we're thinking," ... you know, give them a final say. And then one of the parents spoke up and said, "Well, you know, where is everyone, everyone can be here, I mean, we have these meetings, we advertise..."
>
> And I felt that [just because parents aren't all here], it's not a statement that they don't care, that they don't want to get involved. They may have lots of other reasons. I really felt that we needed to go back out there and get some more information. And Stance said that he was up against a time frame, he had to get his plans for the budget in by the beginning of the month, and he had only two weeks left... Probably he felt that the PAC kind of had that, you know, was in that position to decide. So I spoke out, but I didn't get any support.

When she didn't receive any support for her position, Denae began to question how she was being viewed by other parents, as well as by Stance. Later, she worried that Stance might misinterpret her statements, and think that she was not being supportive of him and of the school.

> I didn't get any support, and of course, since I've just been sitting on the Committee since last September, I feel like the new kid on the block... And I feel I stand out because of my Christian beliefs, and because I come from a little bit different angle than the other people,... and I'm very vocal... I feel kind of like the odd man out... I also felt like I kind of let Stance down, and... in fact, I feel like I need to either write him a note, or phone him up, and say, "You know, Stance, I'm loyal to you, I support you, I know where your heart is. And I did not mean to in any way be critical of you, or judgmental... but personally, in my heart, I felt that that's what we needed to do."
>
> I felt badly, I felt really badly for Stance, and then of course I worried about our relationship, and how he would view me too, and how that would impact us working together. But I don't regret what I said, I still feel like we should have done that.

Although Denae is struggling with wanting to maintain a positive relationship with the school, she is honest enough to raise her concerns about the

Parent Advisory Committee, and its role at the school. Denae raises the question of whose needs are actually being served by the PAC, and she concludes that the PAC as it presently exists does not really serve the needs of parents.

> You know, when I really think about this Committee, I see that it looks like it's a Parent Advisory Committee, but really, what it is, is an opportunity for the Principal and Vice-Principal to voice their needs, especially this past year... Their needs to have additional supplies, and fund-raising... for the things they need in their school. That's how I feel, I feel like it's a way for the administration to present their needs, ... in terms of physical things that they need for the school.
>
> So I see it as not a very powerful committee, really, serving more the needs of the hierarchy, you know, of the staff, of the administration, than, really, what it could be.

When I ask her what she thinks schools could do to promote greater home-school collaboration, Denae recognizes all the things that the school already does in that regard, and then she talks more specifically about the relationship between parents and teachers:

> You know, Stance is very good, at the beginning of the school term, he has kind of a forum, a gathering, where teachers are introduced and parents have time to go and visit in the classroom and meet the individual teachers. You know, you're made, I think, the purpose is to make you feel comfortable, and confident, and to give you an opportunity to meet the teachers, and to go into the classrooms, and see what's going to happen, ... and that's a really great way to start the year. So right away, I think, there's that attitude of, you know, "come to us," and..."
>
> Sometimes I wish I would hear more from my kids' teachers. I wish I would hear from them between parent-teacher interviews, like just a phone call or a note.

When asked what she thinks parents could be doing to promote better collaboration with the school, Denae explains an idea she has for getting a larger number of parents informed about things that are happening at the school, and involved in decision-making.

> I think it would be a good idea to have kind of sub-committees, sitting under the PAC. You know, a committee that would be concerned about certain areas of education, or maybe it's in reading or something... Another committee sitting on their concern about religion, or, you know, different pockets or groups. It would be just a matter of, if you have a thought in your kitchen or at work, and you want to share it, there would be a number you could phone, where you could have a voice on the committee. Everyone can usually find time to make a phone call, if you have a name and a number. And if you get to know each other...

Denae identifies conflicts in values as the major barrier to parent-school collaboration. She recounts a number of incidents where she feels that her values as a parent were in direct conflict with the values that were, indirectly, being taught at the school.

> Last year, the grade four class was brought in to the library to... try and solve a murder mystery. I wasn't able to go, but apparently they had a fake corpse there, and the kids had to determine how this person died, and to solve the mystery. I really objected to that... I felt it was completely unnecessary, what are we doing taking our kids to a library to look at a corpse to solve a mystery, I mean... we shouldn't be focusing on murder, I mean, Thou Shalt Not Kill ... is a commandment, and this is a Christian school, and we should be focusing on what's good, and what's true, and what's right. I just felt that it didn't serve any real useful purpose, and if anything, it just focused on something very negative, and I really question that as being a good learning experience.
>
> And the whole area of Halloween is an issue for me, you know, every October it's an issue for me again. I don't think it's something that a Christian school should be involved in, a pagan celebration...
>
> And the videos, again, you know, like there's all kinds of videos that are brought into our school. My grade five daughter watched a video shown during Halloween time, dealing with the supernatural... Now that video got swept in under the door, got shown to my child... I never knew it was going to be shown, I never got a say in the matter. I really object to that. I'm not sending my daughter to school to watch, I mean, I would not have shown her that video in my own home. And again, I question, what does it teach you, does it uplift you, does it make you feel better about yourself? Are you learning anything useful to help you get along in our society? I object to sitting down and watching something that doesn't feed you in a positive way. I just think there's so much out there that's so bad, our kids need to be affirmed and made to feel

> good... So, I'd like to have a greater voice in what comes in to the school.

Denae also wishes that parents had more of a say in some of the programs that are brought into the school. She uses the example of the Quest program, which is a social skills training program, and which she believes got "swept in under the door" at the school. Denae believes that schools have no need for fancy, expensive programs to teach children. She is convinced that schools and parents just "need a commitment to God's standard," and to rely on Scriptures. However, she is concerned about not appearing narrow-minded or fanatical, and feels that she has to constantly be careful about how much she objects to certain things. She also is very mindful of her own tendency to want to control others.

> I'd like to have a complete say in all things. But again, that's very much in keeping with my personality. I like to control everything and everyone around me!
>
> You know, like I say, I can be critical, but I'd much rather look at, really, the positives, and the overall... So you know, there was this video that crept in and I disapproved, but I'm not going to condemn the teacher for it, I'm not going to condemn the school for it, I'm not going to make a public fury over it. I personally object to it, I think they need to know that, and that I don't approve...
>
> But I guess I'm intimidated, and I'm kind of scared too, because... I kind of have this feeling if I say too much, or say the wrong thing, that somehow my children will be kind of ostracized, or my family will kind of be kept at a distance... I don't want to be seen as a fanatical...

When I ask Denae about her "vision" of parent-school collaboration, how she would know that it is being achieved, she answers easily:

> Oh, if my voice would be heard and acted upon!... Seeing my voice bear fruit, like, no Halloween... you know, or an openness to this corpse in the library thing...

However, Denae wants very much to be seen as positive. She sees dissension as unproductive, and believes that the most important thing to remember

is that the student is at the center, and caring ("having a heart") must be in the forefront. Denae believes that since dissension only fuels more unrest, and serves to cause more problems, we all need to put aside some of our differences and focus on the similarities.

> I just really have a heart for the school. We should start with our similarities... I think dissension doesn't serve any purpose.
>
> It's a given that the student should always come ahead of anything else. I really do see that at Holy Spirit School, that the student is valued, and Stance's heart is for that child... And because I believe that attitude prevails, and that's my strong belief too, that the child should be put foremost. And so, I'm always really ready to listen, to any advice they can give us for our children. Because they do see our children in a different setting, and I really value anything that... I guess that's why I'd like to hear from them more often.
>
> I think the child has to come first, and we should be able to put aside any differences for that child. And I think that happens at Holy Spirit School. Our kids are precious, and we just have to do what's best for them.

3. Clare, the optimist

Clare teaches grade three at Holy Spirit School; she has been employed with the same school district for the past 20 years. Aside from her work as a classroom teacher, she spent two years as a district consultant, but realized that she "missed the kids too much" and chose to return to the classroom this past year.

I interviewed Clare after school one day; we sat at a table in the back of her classroom, surrounded by evidence of children's work activities. On the day we met, two of Clare's students had accidentally run into each other during their gym period, and both had to be rushed to the hospital for stitches. Clare's schedule is very busy, and rather than try to re-schedule to another day, she said she would like to go ahead with our interview, even though she was feeling very tired and somewhat distracted by the day's events. Clare speaks very quickly; at times her words tumble out together, and she has to stop herself to review the question asked. This is how Clare introduces herself:

> I was born in Alberta, raised on a farm for the first few years, loved it, love animals still, love the outdoors, the wide-open spaces... I met my husband when I was in grade nine, started dating in high school. After high school, I went to University, and he went to [a technical college] and became an electrician. Then when we were first married, my husband decided he wanted to go to University and now he's a teacher too. He teaches high school, though.
>
> [At University] I took an Arts Degree first... I wanted to be a teacher, I wanted to be a teacher since I was three or four years old. But I decided to do an Arts Degree first, because someone, I think one of my high school teachers suggested it, instead of learning how to teach, why don't you learn what to teach... So I did. Majored in English, minored in Psychology. Then I took an after-degree program in Education... I had a really bad experience with student teaching, and was never going to teach. So I thought I'd do something else, but it just kind of flowed back into teaching. I did some substitute teaching for a year with another school district, and then I was invited to apply for a teaching job here [at Holy Spirit School] by the Principal at the time. They hired me, and I taught here for a number of years, I don't know, about ten years...
>
> Then our children started being born. We have three daughters, two who are now 16, twins, and one who's 18. They were lots of fun, like truly fun, when they were younger... Now as teenagers, they're

> not quite as much fun! This is not an easy time... And it's hard sometimes to be in the classroom, I have to almost go through a barrier on my way home... This is home now, this is school now. They're good kids, but... at times, it's not easy.
>
> So I started teaching here at Holy Spirit School in 1973, and then after about ten years, I moved to [another school in the district]. I always worked full-time, taught elementary ... I had one year off from teaching, and went back to do some graduate studies when I was granted a [sabbatical year] from the District.
>
> Three years ago, I was given a consultant position in District Office. That was a really neat experience... great, fantastic people working there. But around Christmas a year ago, I decided I just had to be teaching again. I would go into schools and go into classrooms, that was one aspect of my job, and I would leave, and in the car, tears would roll down my eyes, I missed kids so much... and, I would tell people, and they would say, 'hey, we all miss the kids,' and I thought that would go away, but over the year and a half it didn't... so finally, I said, "I'm going back teaching." So this year, it's just such a neat year, I appreciate it so much. Teaching takes a lot of energy, though...
>
> I tend to be "rose-colored glasses." I tend to be optimistic, it's something my children say, and my husband says... people will say that to me, you've got to look at the world the other way. I tend not to see the negatives.

As we begin our interview, I ask Clare to share with me some of her thoughts about parents and schools working together, about parent-school collaboration. It becomes immediately apparent that Clare thinks of collaboration mainly in terms of the relationship between teacher and parent, and the communication between parents and schools:

> O.K., extremely, extremely important... I think as the years go by, we realize just how very important it is... A child who doesn't have the communication between home and school just doesn't have the same benefits as one who does. Now that's whether a child is doing really well in school - they too, need to hear, you know, have Mom and Dad phoned. And the child who may be struggling - if the teacher waits until too long, say to the parent-teacher interviews, to make contact with the parent, what happens is sometimes these things grow too large... or sometimes they become a rut..., whereas if there was a phone call, or contact made many times before, then everyone realizes... And the contact needs to be positive, not negative.

Clare also sees that the main reason for this collaboration/communication between teacher and parent is for the child's benefit.

> I see communication as extremely important, because... the type of relationship the teacher has with the parent really does impact on the child. For example, if the teacher is not having a good relationship with the parent, I mean, even if the parent says nothing, there are those vibes at home... And it affects... so, very important.
>
> I keep seeing the necessity of it, I keep seeing, like, it isn't the child here, totally distinct, in this classroom, from his home life, it's not... We carry them back and forth, the child carries it back and forth... The connection is so important.

Like Anne and Denae, Clare also sees that collaboration between the schools and parents is going to take on an even greater importance in the time ahead, given some of the political changes in education in Alberta.

> I think with the new things that are happening in education in the province,... maybe some of the good things will be that parents will take more ownership, will be part of this more. I don't necessarily mean parents in the classroom, o.k.? 'Cause sometimes that doesn't work... But I think the communication, the ownership of parents will increase. I think in the next three years we're going to see more changes in education in this province, good and bad, than we've seen for a long time. And because I'm optimistic, I think there will be good that comes even out of the parts we don't like... I think collaboration between parents and schools is going to be even more important. Because of the way I see what's going to happen in schools... larger class sizes, less money, parents with less money... and that all affects the child so much, so there'd better be more [collaboration]. And I think it will evolve to more too.

Clare talks about how she works very hard to establish a good relationship with the parents of her students, how she invites them to call her at any time, and how she frequently calls parents at home to talk about what is happening at school with a child. She describes how this relationship between teacher and parent takes time to develop, and also how she knows when the relationship is "established." Clare is particularly concerned with making sure that her interactions with parents

are positive ones, and that the child in question is also being seen in the most positive light possible.

> At the beginning... conversation is usually awkward, it's, you know, it's a forced thing. After a while, ... there should be an ease of conversation, also an honesty in conversation... When they phone, when they feel the ability to call me at any time, and I feel the ability to call them. I say this very early on, if ever there's a question or comment, please call... Don't wait, say anything... And they do, and I do too... Like that, for example, is for tonight . [At this point, Clare shows me the inside palm of her left hand, where she has written, in ink, the names of four or five children - her list of phone calls to make.]
>
> I always try to begin with the positive and end with the positive. If ever I've got something that's kind of heavy to share with them, to say it in a way that won't seem overwhelming... I also think [it's important] to talk about other things besides the child, because that's important too... Because, not only does that continue to help the relationship, and the conversation, but it's a way of me getting to know them better, and them getting to know me better too.
>
> I listen to them a lot; the first thing that I would say, for example, in an interview, is "were there any questions or comments?", ... so I want them to speak first. If they're phoning me, I tend to want to listen to what's happening first, only because I've learned, through the years, that if I assume and start speaking immediately, what happens is that I may assume part of it wrong or all of it wrong... I need to hear them. You'd also see me sitting close, facing them, looking at them...
>
> If I hear the parent especially negative about the child, I do my utmost that the parent leaves the interview, the conversation,... with seeing some really strong aspects of their child.

Clare relates two different positive "stories" of working collaboratively with a parent. Both examples have to do with students in her classroom this year, students who had some very special needs. The first story began last September, and "continues on..."

> A little boy came into our classroom... he had lots of difficulties, he would run away, he couldn't sit in the desk, his language was unreal, getting along with other kids was a problem... So we met early on, Bernard [the counsellor] and I, with the Mom. Both Bernard and I mentioned positive things as well, 'cause the Mom was at her wits' ends... Ahh... many, many phone calls, I don't

> even know how many phone calls I've made... And phone calls at times just to say, "do you know what a great day he had," or "do you know what a great reading class he had," because sometimes it wasn't a full day, so we started off just little, and it was going back and forth.
>
> At times Mom would phone me and say, "is this really what happened?" because at times, he [the child] was coming home with stories, or he'd come here with stories... But then we'd follow up, and the boy knew that both of us were phoning back and forth, and talking back and forth, so... it's rare now, that he'll say things that aren't true, because he knows that we will phone each other, and that there's that bond... Because of that bond, I mean if we didn't have that bond, I don't think that child would have come along as much as he has ..And this little boy's progress has just been phenomenal... and I'm positive it's because of the many, many, many times we've called back and forth... He's now not only able to sit in the desk and to work at a task, but his own positive feelings about himself have really improved.

At this point, Clare talks about how important the school-wide environment, and how the efforts made by other staff members at the school have also been very important in this success.

> And the positive structure of our discipline in the school is really a big part of it too... So there's that working at a school-wide basis, as well as working within the classroom. Of course, there have been LifeSkills programs that he's gone to, and also Bernard [the counsellor] has seen him once a week... But the progress, I'm sure, came from a lot of the conversations with Mom, because Mom was able to feel success as well.

As Clare explains the developing relationship between herself and this parent, she recognizes how her feelings have changed toward her as they have worked together.

> I feel really positive about her now. There were times through it, and even at the beginning, I wondered whether it, ... I mean, it's a horrible blame thing, but I wondered if it wasn't the Mom's fault, you know, when you hear all these things, and in the mind, it's easy to say, "well, if Mom had done this and this and this..."
> I don't see it as 'Mom's fault' now. I mean, it was a whole lot of things put together that caused the child to be the way he was...
>
> Our relationship now, when I phone her I call her by her first name, and I give my first name... and I don't think she feels, when I

> phone, I don't think she feels like, "Oh no, what did he do now?" At the beginning, there may have been some of that feeling, because in the past she's had phone calls like that.... I think it's a good relationship, like we're not best friends, obviously, we wouldn't go out for coffee or anything... it's more of a parent-teacher kind of relationship.

Clare's second story "example" of parent-school collaboration concerns a new student in her classroom:

> This one is about a new student who has just come to our school... We had a series of meetings before he came in, meetings with former teachers, with her parents, and with the school staff to see how we could best provide an environment for her, how we could best meet her needs... When I started to think about the meetings... it seemed like kind of a pain. But as they were happening, I was really grateful for the ability to have them happen, the way the school was set up, the way [the administrators] run it. A substitute teacher was brought in, and these meetings happened. I mean, they're very important, the collaboration between home and school is seen as extremely important.
>
> So after these meetings, we had a fantastic foundation for this little girl coming in. I think if this child had come in, and we hadn't had all these meetings, with parents, and all the others, we would not have been ready... would not have been able to meet her needs. I mean, we can't meet her needs all the time, but we're far more able to understand her, where she's coming from, where her parents are coming from...
>
> I phone her Mom, oh, I don't know, two or three times a week. And, just to say, "hi, it's been like this," "hi, it's been like that." I've been trying to normalize her child's behavior... to kind of ease and calm her as well, but at the same time to let her know, keep her informed. So the collaboration before, and during, is really important with this little girl. Also, it takes a long time to get to know a child. If this was September, we'd have ten months, but we don't have ten months.

With both of these examples, Clare has been talking about students who have special needs, either in terms of learning or behavior problems. She wishes that she had the time to work collaboratively (i.e., communicate frequently) with all parents in this way, but unfortunately the pressures of time and energy create some very real obstacles. This is where she sees that the school-wide focus on communication with parents becomes very important:

> I wish I could say to you, of course I phone all the parents, I mean, if they're doing well, I phone and say, "Do you know what a great day they've had?" But the answer is no, I don't. And yet it's important. I would like to do it, and this is not the only year I've felt like that, but when it comes into the year, and reality, and home life, and school life, and time... it's mainly the time, and the energy, sometimes, just runs out, like there just isn't enough...
>
> I do make a phone call to every parent after the first week and a half [of school in September]. I do that because I've learned over the years that it's a really good idea. I mean, there were times when I wished I would have, so then I started... And it's a way to say "hi, is there anything that I should know about your child that would help me?" Or sometimes I might say, you know, "have there been any comments that come home [about school]?"

When I ask her what she thinks parents can do to promote better collaboration between school and home, Clare gives some examples of things that parents have done that she really appreciated, for example, taking the initiative to call the teacher when they have questions or concerns, or even just to give the teacher some positive feedback.

> I've had parents phone or write a note, saying 'here are some things I'd like you to watch, and please call me if this and this happens'... Also, if they have a question, to phone and ask. Sometimes, these things may grow, or there may be a misunderstanding, by the time I've said something, it's gone through the child and gone home... or the other way around. It may not be quite the same. Or maybe I was totally wrong saying it in the first place.
>
> Do you know what else is really nice? When a parent will think that something you've done with their child is nice, and take the time to just write a little note, like even on the bottom of the page. Because so much of what you do, you're not aware...this way, you know that the parent thought, "you know, that was good!"

When I ask Clare to reflect on a time when she felt that there was not good collaboration occurring, she immediately goes back to an incident that happened to her about ten years ago. Although I asked her to talk to me about a "recent negative" experience, this one is clearly a very significant one for Clare, and she recounts it vividly, as though it had happened just recently. Clare also shares how

much she herself learned from this bad experience, and how she has changed her behavior as a result.

> There was a little guy in my classroom who socially just had such difficulty, he just wasn't fitting in... He never felt part of anything. Academically, he was struggling, too... I send tests home to the parents, parents see them and they send them back. And at that point, I wasn't phoning parents a lot, I guess I hadn't discovered the need yet. And I didn't phone home at the beginning of the year, so we basically had only two contacts [during the year], the two parent-teacher interviews. Later on in the year, when I suggested the parents look at the idea of retention for their child... I remember within the course of talking and meeting and filling out forms and that, they became extremely annoyed, extremely annoyed, because they didn't agree that he was having as much difficulty as he was. I thought I had communicated enough, but in their eyes I hadn't.
>
> They decided not to have him repeat the grade. I know that he continued to have difficulty with the work, with fitting in... So, I don't know. I mean, parents know their children best, too. And it's still their decision as well. But it was more that I didn't feel like we had collaborated, communicated, we hadn't... I mean, it just wasn't... I was really upset, ... I felt really badly about it. I was really annoyed with the parents for a while... annoyed and frustrated because I couldn't seem to communicate with them. But then that hadn't been built up either. See, I'm looking at it now, with the glasses that can see... I wasn't proud of it. I was ashamed of the whole situation, and I kept thinking I could have done this, I should have done that...
>
> So it was the following year that I started phoning, at the beginning of the year; it was the following year that I started phoning parents a lot more. So, even though that was not a good situation, and I look back on it, it's still an awful one... I've learned a lot from it.

The interview continues, and I ask Clare what she would identify as barriers to developing collaborative relationships between parents and schools. She refers to some of the difficulties she experiences as a teacher:

> That first phone call is difficult. Sometimes, I phone and I think, I feel like it's a bad time... maybe it's in the middle of their supper... maybe the child is sitting right there... maybe it's in the middle of an awkward moment in the family, like who knows when I'm phoning? Also, that parents might feel that it's a frivolous conversation, like... don't you have anything better to do? Not that they've said this, but I have this feeling ahead of time. I almost want to apologize about the basis of the phone call. Now [later on

> in the school year] it doesn't feel like that, because we have that [relationship]. And the first time that you have to phone to say that your child's not progressing as well... that's a difficult phone call.
>
> What are some other barriers? Oh, perceptions... their perception of me, my perception of them... A barrier might be the previous year, the barrier of past experience or expectations... Maybe the parents' own experience of school, especially if there was a negative experience.... My methods of teaching might be a barrier to some parents, because that's not their methods... and like, that's something we need to work through, talk through, communicate through... Also, time restraints... Parents are working, and by the time I get home, there's supper and everything else, and... [laughing] this is a silly barrier, but with three teenage daughters, I don't get the phone whenever I want it!

As we continue with the interview, Clare admits that she finds it impossible to define parent-school collaboration, but she is certainly able to describe how she thinks about it:

> Whenever I think about it, I think about working together... Remembering the focus is the child, that's the most important thing... Ummm, it's communication, communication, communication... It's admitting when you're wrong.... Sometimes, it's having that gut feeling and pushing, I mean pushing with your thoughts and saying them, and feeling awkward, putting yourself in an awkward situation... Sometimes it's putting yourself on the line, either the parents or the teacher... It's not easy, it's easier to sweep it under the rug...it's questioning...
>
> Collaboration, to me, means both sides trying, both sides working at it. Collaboration also means something conscious, you have to work at it.... I think you have to think about collaboration, and I think, go through the bad experiences, the growing experiences... and when you do, I think you collaborate more effectively. Like with that bad example, I think if I would have started sooner, and thought of it more, and worked at it, there could have been a collaboration.

Because of her position as a teacher, I ask Clare to talk to me about whether she sees the "power" differences between parents and teacher affecting collaboration, and about how important she thinks it is for parents and teachers to view each other as "equals."

> Well, I think that can easily happen, I think that one thing that we as teachers can do wrong is use big words... Instead, we should be explaining behaviors... and allowing parents to speak, ask them to give us their opinions, to tell us how they see the child. But that can also work the other way, I mean, there are situations where the parent feels they know far more, and it becomes extremely difficult, because maybe they do know far more,... but in your situation, in your classroom, you still have something to offer, some insight as well... Obviously, the parent is more concerned about the child than the teacher.
>
> Mutual respect between parent and teacher is important, but sometimes that doesn't happen instantly, it grows over time.

For Clare, what happens throughout the school is also very important. She sees collaboration as being far more effective if it is part of a school-wide approach, and a "mind-set" on the part of the entire school staff:

> What else is collaboration? It can't happen isolated... I can't have collaboration with the parents in my classroom if that's not something that happens within the school. Or I can't have it as effectively... this is an incredible school. The collaboration that occurs, occurs on so many different levels all the time, between [the administrators and the teachers, among the teachers, between staff and students. It's like a family here... I know that [the administrators] work extremely hard on this. They've created such a home kind of environment, a family environment of caring, and I don't mean phony stuff, 'cause you could feel it... This is true caring. [The administrators] have collaboration with parents, and they make lots of positive phone calls.
>
> So collaboration can't happen in a vacuum, it has to happen within... well, I should say the most effective way for it to happen is within a system like we're doing here, the whole school. And everyone has to buy into it too.

As we conclude our interview, I invite Clare to talk to me about her "vision" of home-school collaboration. Like Anne, it seems that to a great extent, Clare is also living her vision at Holy Spirit School.

> I think part of the vision is this school, it's so based on positives... There's a real open door between parents and kids, parents and the school... That's really a big part of it, my vision of collaboration.

4. Bernard, who believes that "anything can be worked out"

Bernard has been the school counsellor at Holy Spirit School for the past 17 years, and has been employed as a counsellor for this school district for over 23 years. I interviewed Bernard in the office of the school administrators at the end of a busy school day. Although he had already put in a full day's work, Bernard appeared relaxed and interested in sharing his thoughts on this topic of parent-school collaboration. Bernard is a tall, slender man, who speaks slowly and thoughtfully, choosing his words carefully. This is how he introduces himself:

> I started out as a Roman Catholic priest, a parish priest in Calgary. I was given a number of valuable experiences... I was a chaplain in a jail, at a hospital, and at a technical college. Primarily I was in the parish, but was given opportunities to be part of many different parts of society in a short period of time. That gave me quite an experiential background that I probably could never have gotten in any other place or in any other way...
>
> When I left the priesthood, my goal was to work with a school system, as a psychologist. I had taken an Arts Degree beforehand, so I had started [towards] that role already. So I started work at the Alberta Guidance Clinic, and worked there until I completed a Master's Degree in Counselling, and then immediately went into the school system.
>
> In the school system, my choice has been to work at the elementary level,... with younger children, also in a more preventative type of environment, because I think the sooner we get involved, the more chance we have of making changes. I enjoyed working at the junior high level, but my real love was to work with the younger children. And particularly when I had this placement in this school, with [so many] five-year-olds, it was an ideal setting for me.

As Bernard gives me some information about himself, his thoughts on parents and schools collaborating, "working together," start to become evident. Here he speaks about some of the influences that have had an impact on his thinking:

> I'm married, and have three children, two girls and a boy. The girls have had a fairly easy time with school, they're both honor students; my son had a lot of difficulty in school... You know, I guess that he's been one of the strongest influence in my life in understanding

> and reaching out to kids... he's had a marked impression on me... and it's made me understand the parent's perspective, the tortures they go through, the difficulties, the wanting someone to tell them what to do or to help... and, ahh, feeling helpless, and really feeling that they're at the mercy, sometimes, of the school system.
>
> One other influence has been the preschool (kindergarten) program in this school. It's made up of a number of people from a number of disciplines, like you have the teacher, the speech therapist, the occupational therapist, the psychologist, the teaching assistant, and the coordinator... And it's been a really impressionable growing experience with them, to grow into teamwork. How each person has to give up their own discipline, to now share it with others. [For example], in speech therapy, we all learn how to help kids with speech from the speech therapist. But we all have input... So you learn so much about the other discipline, but you have to share yours, too. I think not many people in education get the opportunity to work in a team level like that. That has really helped me, in understanding how you truly work as a team, and learn to give up some of your roles...

Bernard believes that his personality, and some of his personal convictions, also have an impact on how he works with others, including parents.

> I'm not an authoritarian person... I believe, and it's partly my training, and partly my being, the person I am,... that if I don't make a connection with the other person, we're not going anywhere.... If I just come in and demand something, then you shut down and we get nowhere. Or if you come and demand something, we get the same thing. We shut down, and we don't get anywhere. So it's really important to be open, and listen, what are you really saying. Very often, when a parent comes in and they're so angry, if you listen, you hear the concern about their kid. You learn the suffering that the family is going through because of this...

I ask Bernard to talk to me more about his thoughts on parents and schools working together, and he talks about his beliefs that until recently, collaboration between parents and school has been kept pretty much at a "surface level."

> My feeling is that for a long time, parents and teachers and schools working together has been very much a surface thing, and we're only beginning to see what it really means for the parents and teachers and other school personnel to really work closely together for the good of the students.
>
> Very often, schools send papers home and ask parents to mark it, or put their signature on it and send it back, we're informing them that

> the child has done this, but that's it. We're not asking them to do anything further, we're not asking them to be involved. It almost seems like we're just covering our hind end, simply by having them informed...
>
> Very often, if there's a difficulty, it's been the school saying to the parent, "What are **you** going to do about it?", not "What are **we** going to do?"... So that it comes down to "it's your job" or "it's my job", rather than "it's our job, working together."

Bernard sees, however, that we are now seeing a growing emphasis on true collaboration, and he notes that many of the recent trends, in special education and education in general, have contributed to this increased focus on parents and schools really working together:

> In our special education programs, we don't do IPP's [Individualized Program Plans] without bringing the parents in on the first meeting, whereas before we used to prepare the IPP and then meet with the parents and ask them, "Do you have anything to add?" Now they're seen as members of the team...
>
> I would say that over the last ten years, I've seen a gradual change [in this way], to more and more involvement from parents. Parents are a lot more knowledgeable now. They are stronger advocates for their children, and they want to be included in what's happening, they don't just accept... what the school has or recommends, they'll shop for other places too, that have the best programs... So I think a lot of that has made us look at our whole structure.
>
> I think also the focus in education, by being more inclusive, has made our focus more on... working in teams. One teacher is not solely responsible for a child... So you have to keep contact with each other and what's happening. And then if something happens at home, everybody has to know about it and be part of it too.
> ...Teams make decisions, and parents are part of the team. I see that in the earlier years, parents are much more a part of those decisions... As those parents move up, there will be more pressure to continue involving them and to make it a team working, and I think that's great.

Bernard goes on to explain his strong beliefs about what it means for people to truly "work together."

> In my role as a counsellor, I find that it's the main ingredient, ... if we get all the stakeholders - the parents, the teachers, the counsellor, administration, and the students - eventually working together, we

> see progress. [The main thing] is to have everybody working together, not necessarily agreeing, but working together... That we agree that we're all working for the good of the child, and we're not defensive with each other,... we're really looking at and listening to each other, looking at everything... Compromise and working out a system that's going to work for the child.

When I ask him to tell me how he knows whether parents and schools really are working together, Bernard talks about the importance of participants seeing each other as equals, and being able to respect each other's positions. He explains how he sees conflict as being very important; in fact, without conflict, he believes that people are probably remaining at the "surface level" he referred to earlier.

> One of the prime telling points for me is when we disagree, and we work out a solution by including everybody's thoughts and aspects in what we're doing. No one comes on as a heavy, saying "this," neither the parents nor the school... Often it can be either, parents just outright rejecting something, or the school outright rejecting something... When we have disagreements, they're worked out in a manner that everybody feels that they were listened to and had a part in the decision. Not necessarily entirely their way, but they were listened to...
>
> If we're not dealing with areas of conflict between us, then we're probably missing some really important issues... And out of conflict, openly and honestly dealt with, comes growth...
>
> I definitely feel that if we don't work with equality, then the whole aspect of team is gone.

Bernard goes on to tell me what he himself does in his interactions with parents to ensure that this "team-work" can happen:

> One of the first things I attempt to do is make them see that it's team-work, by starting out by saying, "You are the parent, and you have more contact with your child, more knowledge of your child, than I do... What do you see?" I want parents to know that we're on an equal basis.
>
> For example, if I've done some testing [on a child], my report is never written until after I have input from the parents. I don't give a report on test results without making it pertinent to the classroom, so I have to talk to the teacher, and to the parents, because I have to know if this is real, or fits with their child as they see him.

> If anything, that's the thing that I've learned the most in the school system, that in working with an institution, you can't just... There's two ways of presenting things: you can work at a way to get everybody working together, by listening and understanding where people are coming from. Or you can come in and say, "Well, this is the way we should do it," and proceed, and hope that things fit into place.

I ask Bernard to give me an example of a specific time recently when he felt that he was working collaboratively with a parent, and he immediately recounts a story that involved all the aspects of collaboration he has been talking about - equality, everyone having a voice, mutual respect and team-work:

> Some parents had requested that we do some testing with their child in the kindergarten program. I saw the student and did a number of tests, and then we [had a meeting] to discuss the results. The teacher and teacher assistant were both there, as well as the speech therapist, because there were some language concerns. The interview started by asking the parents what their concerns were, and what they saw happening. Then the teacher talked about what she saw happening in the classroom. I spoke about the test results, which didn't show a lot of difficulties, but did show some 'soft' signs of some of the same things the teacher was talking about - concerns about attention, following through with tasks independently.
>
> At that point, the parents interjected that they were pretty sure that they wanted their son to repeat kindergarten, and that he wasn't ready to go on... So then we discussed, each person from their own perspective, the information that had been given, and what was happening... You know, that he would be a very young student in grade one if he went on, that we weren't sure what services would be available in the new school he might go to, etc... Throughout the whole discussion, then, it came to an agreement that the student would probably be best served by repeating the kindergarten program, ...and by returning to this school, where he was known, where a speech therapist was available...
>
> The key factor was the parents' input, that they felt he wasn't ready, ... I could have gone either way. In some cases, the test results may give you really strong feelings, whereas in this case it was not a strong feeling, one way or another. In another situation, I might come in... with much stronger recommendations... But the information that I brought was not that strong.
>
> Everyone felt really relaxed and comfortable with each other... You know, it was a very serious thing too, because they were very concerned about this little boy, and we know he's going to have some struggles. There were a few tears shed about the difficulty

> this year, but they were shed in a comfortable way too... The parents were saying, we appreciate what's been done, and the teacher responding, well, we're not the only ones who have worked at it...
>
> To me, it comes down to the fact that we were all there for this little guy... and everybody wanted the best for him, and everybody had a little bit of different information to put in, and if we put it all together and listen to each other, then he was going to benefit... The decision of whether he went to grade one or not, was not as crucial as the attitudes and the acceptance of the people around there for what was going to happen. 'Cause they would make it work, whichever decision was made.

Although Bernard has a strong belief in parents' right to question decisions that are being made by the school, he thinks that how parents do this is very important. He also thinks that parents need to recognize how much they do know about their own children:

> Parents have to recognize the expertise and information that they have of their children. Very often we go to the doctor, and we accept the doctor as the medical God, we accept his diagnosis without telling him that it still hurts somewhere else. It's the same when parents go to the educational experts... I mean, these parents have taught their children to walk, to talk, and to be social beings before we even brought them into our system. And so, you know, they have to recognize that they do have the expertise and a lot of knowledge to give, without backing down 100%. They always have a right to a second opinion with their child, or a third...
>
> Parents need to question, and question in a supportive way... Not question by putting on the defensive. Often the school personnel, I think, feel attacked, by many segments of the society. When a parent comes in who questions things, the school's first reaction may be a defensive one. And so if parents can question in a supportive manner, "Well, we're wondering what our son's needs are," rather than "You're not giving our son what he needs,"... I think it starts things off on a better foot.
>
> I recommend to parents that they have a right to go in and discuss with the administration the placement of their child, ... but there are some difficulties because some administrators don't believe that [parents] have a right to do that. I tell them [the parents] that how they question, and how they approach it, is often a key factor, too.

When I ask Bernard to share with me an example of a time when he felt that he was not working collaboratively with parents, he chooses to talk about what he calls his "most memorable" occasion, an incident that happened over five years ago.

> A student came to our school, in grade four... He'd been in a special education program in another school, but didn't qualify for it here... but we worked hard in the regular program to work things out for him. The father came in at the start of the year, very concerned about what was going on, and what was happening, and we met with the father and the teacher. We outlined what we were going to do, how we could help him. Now the father really liked the teacher, so things went well that year.
>
> The next year, after about a month of school, the father came in wanting to see me. He said there was something wrong, his son was being mistreated, and he wanted to get to the bottom of it. And I said, well, I had an interview, if he could wait for half an hour, I could see him then. He said no, he was too busy, and he left. And I realized the next day that he'd gone directly to central office, to discuss the incompetency of the school, and what was happening.
>
> Then he was sent back to the school, and the principal, the teacher, and I all sat down with him and tried to go through things and see what was happening. And it just seemed that whatever we did was not acceptable enough... He eventually transferred his son out of the school into another school to complete the year.
>
> The school board did an investigation of the matter, and, I think, bent over backward to appease things for this parent. I felt that we [the school] got a slap on the wrist for not sharing information at the start of the year... which, rightly, could have been shared, but that was not the source of the problem, I felt.... I think the source of the problem was that somebody had made up their mind what they wanted, and when they didn't get it immediately, they thought if they yelled and screamed they would get it...
>
> I don't think the administration [of central office] handled it by trying to work it out, they handled it by trying to appease him... Nobody from central office sat down with him and the people involved. They took his story, they took our story, ... but I think unless you come to a face-to-face issue, there's no way you can work things out. The negotiating was all one-sided, everybody told their one side of the story.

When Bernard reflects now on that particular painful incident, he still has a lot of difficulty seeing how he could have done things any differently. Once again, I hear how important it is to Bernard that "things be worked out."

> I think it's the most significant point where I've got, where we haven't worked something out... I had offered to see him [the father] the very next period, I would still be changing an appointment to see him... but if he couldn't meet with me on those grounds, if he was so mad that he was off to central office before he discussed anything here, I don't think I could have done anything to stop it at that stage.
>
> I still don't know, things were not that different from the year before, that it couldn't have been worked out, in my mind. Obviously, the father saw it very differently...
>
> I feel that there's nothing that we can't work out together, that no matter what our differences are, if we're both willing to take a stance, that we can work it out and we'll find a solution, that we can, even though it may be difficult... we can eventually work out things.

I ask Bernard to tell me what he sees as barriers to parent-school collaboration, and he responds, "school personnel." At first, his answer puzzles me, because it seems as though in the example he gave, it was the parent who was unwilling to work with the school. Bernard clarifies his meaning by talking about how he believes that educators have greater responsibility in this process, because they should be more "objective." Bernard also believes that there will be an increasing need for educators to develop the skills to work collaboratively with parents.

> Although I've been very fortunate with the administrators at this school, I've worked with some others ... who put blockages to working anything out, by their attitude of "It has to be this way!"... I think so often we can get, I guess it's our "professional back" up, and say, in essence, "I'm the professional, I should know, how dare they question my techniques, or my activities!"
>
> Certainly there are parents who just don't have the social skills to do what's necessary, there's parents who don't have the necessary involvement with their children or are not mature enough to handle some of these things,... and there are parents that are in power struggles with every segment of our society, and the school is a likely target.
>
> Certainly, it's on both sides, but I feel that we are the professionals, and we should have more opportunity, and have the tools, to work

> that out. And we're going to need them more and more. We've gotten away with some things in the past that we won't get away with anymore.
>
> I think that as a professional, I need to professionally approach the problem, and I should be able to separate my own emotion from what's happening. Whereas a parent is caught up in their own family, this is their child. I get caught up with my own children, but I can step back and be objective about your child because I don't have the same ties [that you do].

When I ask Bernard if he can try and describe collaboration as he understands it, he chooses his words very carefully, talking once again about the importance of people working things out together.

> Collaboration is working and sharing together... If we disagree, we're going to work it out, and find out what's best. I'll listen to you, you'll listen to me, and we'll accept that of each other... We've got to get on the same wave length... If an issue comes up, we've got to come to an agreement as to how we're going to work this out. Disagreeing or agreeing is not the issue, it's how are you and I going to work together for this child when we think things should be done differently.

Finally, I invite Bernard to share with me his vision of how he would like to see parents and schools working together, and his answer supports his earlier statements about the greater responsibility of the school, and the importance of working as a team.

> In a sense, it will always be a vision, because we're dealing with human beings, o.k.? But to me, the ideal will be when the school embraces the parents as full members of their team in working with the child, ...[for example], that it's not just our role to teach them reading, but it's the parents' role also... but not by following a reading program that we put out, but by letting them know how we're teaching in the classroom and what we're doing, ... and by asking them back, what are things that work with your child? And when we reach the point when we can start asking each other that, and sharing that way, then we're reaching collaboration.
>
> And when there's an issue of conflict, we'll find a way in which we can work it out for the best, for all of us together. And when we have something joyous going on, we'll also celebrate it together. 'Cause we'll both be a part of that same celebration, it won't be the

> schools celebrating, or the parents celebrating, it will be a celebration together.

5. Stance, the peacemaker

Stance, a man in his mid-forties, has been the principal of Holy Spirit School for the past five years. He is the only one of my participants whom I knew before I undertook this study, although our relationship was of a distant professional nature. Last year, Stance and I both participated in a Special Education Review for another school district. As I observed Stance working in the group, I was struck by his openness, his articulateness, and his sense of enthusiasm and professionalism towards education. When I approached Stance to see if he would be willing to participate in this study, I was pleased with his eagerness to assist me and to learn whatever he could from the process as well.

I met Stance at the school for our interview, and he told me he had made arrangements to spend the whole afternoon with me. Since this was my first interview and I was feeling a bit nervous and excited, it took me a little while to set up my tape recording equipment and to get started. However, Stance's interest in our topic got things started easily. Stance speaks very quickly; at times his words tumble out on top of each other, and he frequently anticipates my next question. This is how Stance introduces himself, his background and experiences:

> I've been with this school district from the beginning of my career... I've been an administrator for about ten years, and prior to that I taught about ten years. I've also done some teaching every year [that I've been in administration], except the last year I only taught one period, so it didn't really count. Most of my teaching experience has been in grade seven, but I've taught in almost all other grades.
>
> I'm all Alberta educated... I did a B.A degree, and then went into education in an after-degree program. I also got a grad diploma in Administration... I think that a lot of my training in education has been 'on-the-job' training, and I feel that I've been catching up to people in education for twenty years, quite frankly.

> I really like administration, because it has a lot of novelty to it. And there's a lot of creativity to it, when you can get beyond the paperwork!
>
> I have two children, both in high school now. My wife's an elementary teacher, which is a definite asset, because, boy, at home I certainly hear the teacher's point of view... And that's a good reminder, because when you get out of the homeroom and into administration, even if you're still teaching, you certainly forget some points of view. So she's really good that way, and that helps a lot in terms of my being a good listener."
>
> My only community activities are some parish stuff, like sitting on committees or something like that...I'm pretty single-minded about what it is I like to do. My work is my hobby, and it's a good thing it is, 'cause I don't know how you do it otherwise. So what I'm trying to do is balance -- there are four things, right? Home, family, friends, and self... Thank God [my wife] is a teacher, 'cause it makes it a lot easier [because she understands].

As he talks about himself, Stance starts to give me some insight into his views on collaboration in general, and how important it is to him to work collaboratively with others.

> I'm a peacemaker, and I have a strong philosophy that that's the kind of person that a good collaborator has to be. I have a drive, an innate drive, to make sure that there's peace around me, in my environment. And I'm not happy unless it feels that way, that people are feeling good, and that they buoy one another up... If things are kinda rocky, we can talk to each other about it... but we don't go around being negative... So it's important that we support one another, so people can all feel good, and then we can more easily work together...
>
> I have a strong religious belief that we all have gifts and talents to share, and that we're not supposed to go bury them in the ground like in the parable, but we're supposed to invest them, and I invest them in other people... I think that's where my drive to collaboration comes from.

Because of his beliefs about the need for people to work together, Stance says that he has actively worked to make the school a place where people work collaboratively. However, he realizes that parents have not yet been brought in as "full members" of the team.

> At our school, we've been working for two or three years now on becoming more collaborative, taking more of a team approach. We're doing some things specifically at the staff level to deal with that, but we haven't done very much yet in terms of parents... [I've thought] that parents didn't want to be involved in setting school goals, but maybe...

Stance then goes on to tell me how important he believes it is for the school to establish and maintain good relationships with parents, and he talks about some of the things that he does as the school principal to ensure that this happens.

> At the beginning of the year at our parent orientation, I talk about communication, and about attitudes, and one of them has to do with asking questions directly to the person concerned... Instead of phoning me, [I encourage] parents to call the teacher and just ask... Without being afraid of doing it, just call and talk to them if you have questions or concerns... Then if there's still a concern, come and see me. So I don't tend to take first-time calls without the teacher being involved. I tell staff that, and I tell parents to chat with their children's teacher, just to sort things out, get the other point of view if they're upset about something, or if they have an idea of how something could be done a little bit differently...
>
> We do a lot of things informally, like on the telephone... Around here we phone parents on almost a nightly basis, either [the vice-principal] or myself, to talk to them about good things their kids have done. And that gives parents a chance to bring up any concerns that they might have, so we spend time talking about things on sort of an on-going basis.
>
> Through our newsletters, we're always asking for opinions of parents, on different topics. The last one had to do with special education services in our school, if their kids get any help from someone other than the homeroom teacher, what they think about that. Another one was about supervision in the school, asking parents what are their views about who owns the bulk of the responsibility, the school or the home, in supervision and how kids behave. Also what sort of resources we need to bring in to ensure that supervision satisfies everybody's needs...
>
> We annually do school reviews, and most of the time those involve parental perceptions. We also have three Parent Advisory Councils in the school, one for the grade one to six parent group, one for the Kindergarten, and a Preschool Local Advisory. The formats are basically the same, and the agendas are sometimes set by us and sometimes they're set by the parents. It depends on the parents.

As soon as Stance has talked about these formal and informal structures for parent-school interaction, he begins to muse about the complexity of these relationships. Here he seems to be referring to something that Bernard also talked about, that collaboration may exist at various "levels." For Stance, one concern is that of finding a "balance" between parent and school decision-making. He analyzes his own understanding of parent-school collaboration, wondering just how far the school can "go" with collaboration before losing a certain balance. Here the words "safeguards" and "parameters" seem particularly important, as Stance struggles with some of the changes that he sees occurring in terms of parent participation in educational decision-making.

> I never know, you know Marianne, what level of collaboration are we at... I keep wondering, how much are we at a surface level as compared to a much deeper level of collaboration... And I'm never sure at what point it's appropriate to make sure that you have some safeguards in place, and what does that do to parent-school collaboration... So anyway, I wrestle with that all the time...
>
> We all share some responsibilities and roles. But at the same time we need to recognize that in certain areas we have decision-making authority or power... I do believe that in true collaboration, there's a recognition of that. And what I'm trying to sort out is where you draw the line, what's most appropriate, especially in terms of the way things are changing right now.
>
> So, in what areas do you involve parents fairly, so that they have as full a range of decision-making as anybody else, a staff member, an administrator, or whatever. Are there any areas like that? I'm just not sure where the parameters are right now, anymore...

Here Stance grapples with one of the most crucial issues of parent-school collaboration, that which Lightfoot (1978) refers to as the "separate spheres" of the family and the school.

> But I think that in true collaboration, it's something like, in your home, you make the decisions about how your family's going to be raised and what's going to happen there. And in the school, I can see that I can make some decisions that you might not agree with, but in this situation, it seems to me to make the most sense to do it

> that way... And to say that we recognize that there are differences between home and school, so there are differences in terms of behavior, what's appropriate for different times and places. And at the same time we recognize we can talk about those sorts of things, and sometimes we can make changes.
>
> It drives staff up the wall when I talk to a parent, and then I come back to the teacher and say, "Well, maybe we should change the consequences here, because it's not going to be the most effective way for this child to learn."... At that point, I don't know, it does drive staff up the wall, because they want everything cut and dried, but sometimes for the sake of the child, it makes a difference.

I ask Stance how he knows when parent-school collaboration is occurring, and he begins to describe his own understanding of collaboration. Stance is convinced of the importance of people being able to express different points of view, but believes that this must be done in a "cooperative" rather than "confrontational" manner. He also believes that collaboration must lead to some changes.

> When the regard is non-confrontational, o.k., just cooperative. So if we're working in a cooperative manner, then we're looking at each other in ways where we welcome differences of opinion and different points of view, and we can talk about them, o.k.? And we're comfortable with sorting things out, as opposed to a confrontational [situation], when we're always afraid of what the other person is going to say, and they're never going to listen to us, and we're always having to win... our point or view has to predominate.
>
> It's like a team approach, o.k.? I think that if you've built a team, people come to understand the roles they play within the team. And then I believe in the feelings that engenders, that people are encouraging of each other, and really want others to say what they think.
>
> The feeling that you bring to any meeting tells you whether or not you're getting collaboration going. Also, whether or not any change is effected. I don't think that you have real collaboration unless you have some changes that occur as a result of the discussions that go on... Collaboration has to promote change, because the different points of view have to affect what's going on.

Stance is keenly aware of the different points of view that are held by parents and educators. He sees himself as a person who spends a lot of time trying

to get people to understand the other point of view. At times, he thinks he spends too much time doing this; this is partly a result of his own personality and partly how he sees his role as a principal. He also sees himself trying hard to listen well to what others are saying, so he won't misunderstand:

> Sometimes, I think I spend too much time helping people try to understand the other point of view. It's almost a natural thing, because if you don't understand what's going on,... I don't want to be argumentative, but I have to present the other point of view... I don't want false information out there. One of the things that I look at in my role [as principal] is that I'm expected to make sure that people get accurate information.
>
> I'm a really good active listener at times also... [If you were to observe me], you'd see me paraphrase parents, what they are saying, clarify that I'm understanding them.

The whole issue of roles is a difficult one; Stance admits that he struggles constantly to find a balance between his role as a principal, which he believes involves having to make sure that people have lots of "correct" information, and his role as a listener and a team member.

> I never know when I'm supposed to open my mouth and when I'm not, 'cause I want to promote people talking, but at the same time I don't want false information out there. One of the things in my role that I'm expected to do is make sure that people get accurate information. So I find that one frustrating and difficult, because [I know] that it's always going to depend on the listener's point of view more so than on mine... Anyway, I wrestle with these sorts of things, what do I say, what do I say...

Stance describes "role release," which involves the possibility of sharing roles and responsibilities. He believes that it is important for participants in a collaborative process first to understand their respective roles clearly, and then be willing to share these roles to some extent..

> You still have your predominant role and I have mine, but we can share roles a bit, without giving up our basic responsibilities.

As he speaks, Stance reveals his sense that in terms of parent-school collaboration at Holy Spirit School, there is still a lot of room for growth. He gives an example of this:

> Now I happen to know we're not there yet, because at a recent meeting, where we were coming up with ideas of how we can reduce the school budget, a couple of people gave the chairperson some private pieces of paper after the meeting... 'Cause they were afraid of saying things to [the vice-principal] and I, they were afraid of hurting our feelings, so.. we're not there yet, I guess that will come with time.

When I ask Stance to tell me about a specific time recently when he felt that he was working collaboratively with a parent or a group of parents, he gives me two examples. One example is of an encounter with an individual student and his mother; the other is a recounting of a recent consultation process that was held on a district-wide basis. In the individual example, it seems much clearer that Stance feels there was good collaboration occurring between the school and the parent. One of the important aspects here is Stance's reference to respecting what is "home stuff" and what is "school stuff."

> At one of my last discipline conferences, a Mom came in with her son, who was having difficulty getting homework done. And so we used a "corrective teaching" model, but the Mom and I, and the boy, worked on that together. We went through the different steps in the model, and that was very effective, I think like a true collaboration. The Mom allowed me to ask some questions about how things could be done at home, but some stuff was left in her hands, 'cause it's home stuff. But things that were at the school were left in my hands... And so it was good, we had a chance to suggest ideas and talk together about ideas.
>
> The Mom was willing to come in and sit down so we could do that together. I had phoned her and said, "really, Sammy is saying that it's not his fault, it's because of the circumstances at home. Can you come in together?" And she said, "Sure."... but that's pretty rare.

In the other example, Stance describes a current situation, where the School District has invited parents and staff to provide input on financial decisions. As he talks, Stance continues to clarify his own beliefs about what "true collaboration" consists of. He begins to realize more clearly how important it is for everyone to have a voice.

> The School District invited parent representatives and school staff from each school to participate in meetings to discuss the district's financial situation. Administrators were present at the meetings, but their role was to be facilitators... Aside from that, just step back and let parents and staff say what they think. Parent representatives ran the meeting. They had been provided with all sorts of background documentation in terms of the District's operating budgets and the school budgets, and things like that, so they would have a good understanding of what was involved...
>
> Parents and staff worked in small groups, and then reported back to the larger group. There was no place here for administrators to say what we thought... we'll get our chance to give input next Thursday. And then all that information is going to be just sort of equally thrown into a summary basket of information for the Board.
>
> I guess it wasn't true collaboration, though, 'cause I wasn't able to say what I thought [at the meeting], I was having to step back... Another sign that it wasn't true collaboration is that a couple of people were afraid of hurting my feelings, and when they recommended less administration time for the school, they didn't feel free to say that in front of the group...

Here Stance talks about the incident he referred to above, where parents wrote down suggestions they were too afraid to present verbally. He explains how he has learned from that experience, and is using that learning as he writes a memo to the staff. For Stance, it is crucial for people to be willing to be honest and open with each other.

> I'm making sure to tell people in this memo that if you want to talk about administration, feel free, we want your opinions and we make better decisions when we know what you're really thinking as opposed to what you think we want to hear or anything like that...

As the interview continues, I ask Stance to give me a "negative" story, of a time when he felt that collaboration between parents and the school was not occurring. Once again, Stance gives two examples, one which relates more to the entire parent group, and the other an individual incident. In the first example, Stance describes the situation that existed when he first became principal at Holy Spirit School.

> When I first came to this school, I felt that I had to prepare a battle plan before going to parent meetings... There were some people who were really upset about things that were going on... there were some definite lines that had been drawn, that kind of a feel was there... Parents were saying, "we don't know what's going on here"... I think that things have improved a lot, but at first, we were spending the first 30 to 45 minutes of each meeting talking just about the good things that were going on in the school... Because we had to prove that there were good things happening... Before I came here, some of the staff seemed to believe that we don't have to tell parents what we're doing. We just do the good things, and everything will take care of itself, eh? And it was just head-in-the-sand stuff...
>
> Seriously, one of the administrators would talk for 45 minutes, telling parents about all the good things that were going on in the school that month... We had to start effecting a change, and finally after about a year and a half, parents said, "That's enough of this, thank you, we know lots of good things are happening here," so finally, at that point, we could start working on issues together.

Stance's second "negative example" is of a situation that occurred last June, and which he refers to as a "career experience." Although it was a very troubling experience for Stance, it has also helped him to clarify some of his beliefs about collaboration, one of which has to do with the importance of having some basic agreement of values.

> It stands out in my mind, it will always stand in my mind 'cause it had never happened before, I hope it doesn't happen again... A father came in here and yelled at me... It was in reaction to a discipline decision [of the school]. This concerned a student who kept hurting other kids, and the Dad was always insistent that the boy was just defending himself, that he had a constitutional right to do so. We [the school staff] went on a straight performance

> orientation with him, if you get into a fight, then here are the consequences. Well, on this particular instance, the boy was not allowed to go on one of the school's "reward trips," because he'd been involved in a fight the day before...
>
> So that was it, the father came into the school and yelled at me... He was quite upset that I wouldn't acknowledge his point of view, or the fact that under some circumstances it's all right to pound the hell out of somebody else. So there was not collaboration there at all... The man was very rude,... yelled, said his piece, and then marched out again.
>
> There was no opportunity to work things out, it was pointless. He moved his son out of the school,... what he was really saying was, "I can't leave my son in a school where our policies are so inconsistent. My policy at home is diametrically opposed to your policy at the school." And that was an appropriate move on his part, I believe.... The boy was consistently left in no-man's land, between the school policy and the home policy.
>
> We couldn't bend, because our Parent Advisory Council had taken such a strong stand in terms of discipline in the school. We need some basic agreement before we can collaborate...

When I ask Stance to reflect more on some other barriers that he sees to parent-school collaboration, he talks once again about the importance of openness, honesty, trust, as well as having the skills that he considers necessary.

> Hidden agendas... like, when people have an axe to grind, but they don't come out and just talk about it and deal with it... So it's in behind them, and you don't know what it is, and that gets in the way. Also people who are negative, that really gets in the way... Or people who just can't bring themselves to trust, to believe something that you say. I'm always amazed when I run into that, you say something to someone and they just don't believe you...
>
> So those things get in the way of collaboration. Also lack of technique, for example not knowing how to be active listeners, to accept differing points of view... Lack of vision, not having set a common purpose or goal... People not sure what their roles are, or not being willing to share roles a bit... Some of it comes down to past baggage too, I think past baggage really gets in the way of a lot of collaboration... So if we could just kind of leave things behind us and start over with one another...

When I ask about his "vision" of parent-school collaboration, Stance begins by explaining what he calls the "invitational stance":

> It's optimism, trust, respect, and intentionality, those are the four characteristics. I think that we can get true collaboration if we come together using the invitational stance. I see collaboration as a partnership, with all stakeholders working together for the benefit of the child, of children. The goal is to maximize the potential growth for everyone in the school community, parents, staff, and children... I think the ideal would be for everyone -- parents, staff, and students -- to have involvement in all aspects of the school.
>
> I think collaboration between parents and the school is absolutely essential if we are going to maximize children's development. But I think collaboration will vary according to each situation.

My interview with Stance took place at the end of February, over two months before I met with the other four participants in this study. When I returned to meet with him in May, to share the transcribed interview and my analysis, I quickly realized that Stance had done a lot of thinking about parent-school relationships since our February meeting. After reviewing the documents, Stance took it upon himself to write down some further thoughts, and we spent a couple of hours discussing these together. One of the first things that he told me was that he had decided that he wanted to invite parents to be involved in setting future school goals, as well as the school "creed." He said, "I've been thinking of my job as principal as the keeper-of-the-vision, but I realize that if we wish to use the school creed as the basis for making decisions, we need to make sure that parents have also been involved in developing that creed."

Stance also said that he had been thinking about the need for roles and responsibilities of parents and schools to be clarified, especially at this time when there is so much talk about "opening up" the schools to parents, and giving parents greater control of schools through Parent Councils.

Part Two: Describing Parent-School Collaboration: Significant Themes among Participants

Before selecting the most important themes that emerged from the interviews with the parents and educators, I made a summary of the significant issues addressed by each of the participants. The following is a short caption of these issues:

Anne

1. The importance of "being listened to as a parent," feeling heard and validated (without pride or defensiveness on the school's part). For Anne, collaboration is mainly defined in terms of "communication with the school about her own children" and their educational needs.
2. The importance for her to be able to "trust the school," and a recognition that this trust is something that develops over time.
3. The impact of "educators' attitudes" toward parents (not expecting "automatic" or instant trust).
4. The diffuse boundaries between home and school for the child is what makes home-school collaboration so important and necessary ("mutually influencing quality" between child's world at home and child's world at school).
5. The importance of the "parent feeling supported" (in Anne's case, this had a lot to do with the need for linkages between the medical and the educational worlds).

Denae

1. The importance of "having a voice," a "say in all aspects" of education for her children. (Denae struggles with the role of the PAC, and whose needs it is serving).
2. We are in a time of change in terms of parents' roles in education decision-making.

3. The parent-teacher relationship is a crucial one, and needs to be "nurtured/supported" by both parents and teachers. Denae believes that it's very important for parents to be supportive and positive of the school.

4. The importance of the principal's role in determining the school environment, its openness to students and to parents.

5. The importance of caring, "having a heart for children, for the school."

6. Parent's concern with how she is being perceived by the school, and how her children may be viewed as a result of who she is or what she says.

Clare

1. Collaboration for Clare is primarily defined in terms of "communication between parents and the school," and in terms of the relationships between teacher and parents.

2. The importance of "being positive, looking at the child in a positive way," saying positive things, etc.

3. Relationships "develop over time"; it takes time for mutual trust, respect, and partnership to develop between teacher and parents.

4. The importance of a "school-wide commitment to collaboration," and the importance of the administrators' role in this.

5. Clare talked a great deal about the importance of being honest, open, of acknowledging the importance of parents.

6. The diffuse boundaries between home and school for the child are implicit in many of Clare's comments.

Bernard

1. The importance of schools working with parents as "full partners, as team members." (Parity, equality, valuing each person's knowledge.) Bernard believes that until now, most parent-school collaboration has been at a "surface" level.

2. His belief that "everything can be worked out," if people are willing to listen to each other.

3. His thoughts about how trends in special education have had an impact on the relationship between parents and schools.

4. The importance of accepting and even welcoming conflict as a sign that we are not working at a "surface" level.

5. The importance of educators recognizing and acknowledging parents' knowledge, parents' rights. Responsibility of educators to be professional, to share power (non-authoritarian).

6. The importance of how people work together: positive, mutual appreciation, non-authoritarian, personal contact ("face-to-face negotiation").

Stance

1. The importance of communication, listening to other people's points of view, valuing openness and honesty in sharing ideas and thoughts.

2. Having some level of "basic agreement" is essential for collaboration to occur.

3. The need to clarify roles and responsibilities of parents and of the school. This is related to the concept of "balance", of being clear "how far" we can go in terms of collaboration.

4. The importance of having a "positive attitude, of trusting others" and being open to each other (an attitude of cooperation, non-confrontational).

5. The sense of being himself in process, and also seeing that we are in a time to change in terms of how we view the relationship between parents and schools.

Summary

This understanding of the most important themes from each participant's perspective has been the starting point for the following discussion of the significant themes that have emerged from this study.

As they spoke, each of the participants shared with me what they saw as the most important influences on their beliefs about parent-school collaboration. **Clare**, for example, talked about the work she has done in the area of child abuse, which has helped her understand the diffuse boundaries between home and school; her involvement with the Catholic Church, which she sees as an organization that is based on collaborative relationships; and the fact that she is herself a parent, and is married to a teacher. **Bernard** identified the most important personal influences on his beliefs regarding parent-school collaboration as his experience in the priesthood; having children of his own, and how that allowed him to really understand the parent's perspective; and his involvement in the pre-school program at the school, with its focus on interdisciplinary team-work. **Stance** spoke about his religious beliefs that we are given "talents" to share with others, and his experiences in terms of working with staff members within the school. For **Denae**, her strong religious convictions form the basis for much of her thinking about parent-school collaboration, as well as her own strong desire to "have a say," to have a sense of control over what happens in her children's lives. **Anne's** experiences as the parent of a critically ill child who has developed learning problems as a result of medical treatment have led her to a role of advocacy, and have given her the strength and conviction to fight for what she believed to be in her child's best interests.

As I studied the interviews, I became increasingly aware that what I learned were the **perceptions, beliefs and attitudes** held by each of the participants. These perceptions and attitudes are developed as a result of:

- people's personal beliefs, convictions, and philosophy.
- past experiences with schools/parents.
- day-to-day interactions with schools/parents.

One of my supervisory committee members made the comment, during an earlier discussion, that anyone who is either an educator or a parent of a child in school cannot help but have had both positive and negative experiences with respect to parent-school collaboration. This was indeed the case with each of the participants in my study. When I asked them to talk to me about a recent positive experience they had with collaboration, everyone was easily able to tell me a "story" of an experience that they felt was a good example of parents and the school working well together. Likewise, when I asked them to tell me about a recent experience that they felt was negative, no one had any difficulty finding something to talk about. However, what I found to be most surprising were these negative "stories." Rather than talking about a recent experience, some participants chose a negative story that occurred a year ago, five years ago, and in the case of Clare, almost ten years ago. What seemed significant was how impactful these experiences had been for the participants in the study; in every case, they had felt a great deal of pain, hurt, and frustration at not having been able to "collaborate" successfully. For some, it was also an occasion for some soul-searching, some personal growth, and even some changes in how they approached similar situations in the future.

Another interesting facet was that many situations were not entirely "clear-cut" in terms of being positive or negative examples of collaboration. For example, even as Anne described how difficult she had found it to write the letter to the Superintendent complaining about her son's program, and not feeling that her point of view was acknowledged by the school, she also was able to recognize some of the positive changes that had been implemented later, and felt that "just talking" about her concerns and getting everything out in the open had been helpful.

Themes

Nine major themes or "issues" emerged from the analysis of the interviews. The first two themes address the question of the importance of parent-school collaboration, and the other seven can be seen as characteristics of that collaboration.

In order to present the themes that have emerged from the analysis of the interviews, I have chosen to look at the various ways that parent-school collaboration has been described, as the participants addressed these two questions:

(1) Why is parent-school collaboration important?

1. Children live in two worlds, home and school
2. Current changes in society

(2) What are the characteristics of collaboration?

1. Communication
2. Trust, openness, honesty
3. Positive, supportive, caring attitudes
4. Personal connections
5. Being equals
6. Power, conflict, and roles
7. School-wide commitment

(1) Why is parent-school collaboration so important?

Children live in two worlds

Each of the participants in this study was committed to the value and importance of parent-school collaboration. The most frequently mentioned reason for this was related to the "diffuse boundaries" for the child between the home and the school, or what Christenson, Rounds and Franklin (1992) refer to as the "mutually influencing quality" among home and school experiences.

Denae speaks of the parent-school relationship as a "crucial" one, that should be continually nurtured. For Anne, "working with" the school means working in a "team" approach. She describes parent-school collaboration as an ongoing relationship, where both parties have to work as partners because they both have a vested interest in the child:

> Not that they're the educators and I'm the parent, and when he comes home from school, that their job ends and mine begins, it's an ongoing relationship that happens, from day to day.
>
> You know, this is the parent, and if they have expressed an interest in their child's education, we have to work together as a team, not, "We're the educator, and leave your child in our hands."

Clare talks about how the parent-teacher relationship affects the child; even if nothing is ever said directly, the child can't help but "pick up the vibes at home." Clare is also keenly aware of the connection between the home and the school for the child. Her work in the area of child abuse has made her particularly conscious of this fact:

> I keep seeing, like, it isn't the child here, totally distinct, in this classroom, from his home life... It's not, we carry them back and forth, the child carries [his experiences] back and forth. For example, some children carry abuse back and forth. I mean, how can learning how to divide be important to them some days? I can't solve things simply by collaborating with the parents, or even discuss it... But, we need to realize that the connection is so important.

Bernard also talks about how "the main ingredient" in helping students to progress is to have all the stakeholders -- the parents, teachers, counsellor, administrators, and students -- working together.

Changes in society

The other theme that emerged when participants spoke about the importance of parent-school collaboration was that of change. Without exception, everyone spoke about their belief that we are in a time of change with respect to the roles of parents and schools.

For both Clare and Denae, this change is connected with the current political situation in Alberta, with budgetary reductions that may lead to parents having a greater role, a "say" in school-related decisions. Denae has heard about the American "voucher system," whereby parents would be given an education voucher and the freedom to choose their child's school program. Denae believes that until now, parents have not had a very strong voice in the schools, but she sees that a major change is coming in that respect, and calls it an "exciting" time. Along with that excitement, however, is a lot of uncertainty about the future, and how these changes will be brought about.

Clare talks about some of the things that are happening in education in Alberta, saying, "I'm sure there are going to be things I won't like, but one of the good things will be [the province] saying, 'parents, take ownership, parents, be part of this more.'" Clare believes that collaboration between parents and the school will be even more important in the future, because of some of the things that are happening in the schools: "larger class sizes, less money, parents with less money, parents without jobs, and that all affects the child so much... so there'd better be more."

Anne talked about how with her first child, she didn't see the importance of working with the school, and saw that she and the educators had "different roles." However, when Justin came along, with some very special needs, she began to realize that:

> We both have a vested interest in this child, and we have to work together to make sure that his education goes as best as it can. So it, my role, I felt it was different ...than what I had experienced when I was in school, and certainly [different than] what my parents had experienced.

Anne also believes that as a whole, this generation of parents has more education, and also higher expectations of the schools. She sees parents getting involved more, questioning more, "maybe communicating more." However, for Anne the bottom line is that the reason her relationship with the school is so important to her comes down to the caring she has for her children, "they're my kids, and I love them... If my children weren't so important to me, I wouldn't care so much, I wouldn't need to develop this relationship."

Bernard spoke about how be believes that collaboration between schools and parents has pretty much been kept at a "surface level" until quite recently... "We're only beginning to see what it really means for parents and teachers and other school personnel to really work closely together." Bernard talked about how he has seen a gradual change over the last ten years, with increasing emphasis on parents being involved in decision-making at the school. Parents "shop for other places... that have the best programs, and that has made us look at the whole structure." He sees that changes in the area of special education have had an impact on education in general; in particular, the trend towards integration of special education students into regular programs has resulted in a greater emphasis on a "team approach" among educators as well as between the school and parents. Like Anne, he sees that parents are now more knowledgeable, and are less willing to just accept the schools having total authority over educational decisions. As a result, educators will have to develop better skills or "tools" to work collaboratively with parents. Bernard says, "We've gotten away with some things in the past that we won't get away with anymore."

Stance says that he also realizes that parents have "not yet" been brought in as full members of the educational "team." He talks about how he sees himself "in process," and changing some of his own views about the role of parents. He admits that at times, he thought that many parents didn't want to be involved in some areas, such as setting school goals. He realizes that he needs to modify some of his beliefs, given the changes that are happening and the increased emphasis on parents and schools working together. Stance refers to collaboration as existing at various "levels," and says he wonders how much their school is still operating at a "surface" level with respect to parent-school collaboration. He gives examples that show that "we're not there yet" in terms of true parent-school collaboration, but adds that he thinks "that will come with time."

Stance also spoke about "change" in another sense, in that he believes that collaboration, if it truly effective, will also lead to some changes. Stance thinks that if the various points of view are being heard and truly considered, then changes must occur as a result of these ongoing discussions. This position contradicts the idea expressed in Garfunkel's (1986) paper, suggesting that a "partnership" approach is basically a "status quo" approach. According to Stance, a true partnership approach will result in tangible changes.

(2) What are the characteristics of collaboration?

Communication

Clare and Anne both talk about collaboration mainly in terms of the "communication" between the home and the school. Clare believes that the communication between school and parents is "crucial." When she describes her "negative" story, she concludes that the main problem was that she had not communicated enough with the parents throughout the school year about their child's difficulties. That experience had a very powerful impact on her, and she

says, "I guess I hadn't yet discovered the need for phoning home a lot." It was the following year that Clare began making phone calls to all the parents after the first couple of weeks of school, to open the "lines of communication right from the beginning." Clare believes that a lot of problems that arise between the school and parents can be avoided through good communication, especially communication that is of a positive nature. She believes that the school has the greater responsibility to initiate this communication, although parents also have an important role to play. Clare calls parents frequently, especially when she knows that they have special concerns about their child.

Stance believes that without communication, collaboration is impossible. When he speaks to parents at beginning-of-the-year orientations, he talks to them about how important it is that parents take responsibility for communicating directly to the person concerned if they have any questions or problems. Throughout his interview, Stance talked about how much he values open, honest communication. Stance is keenly aware that people have varying points of view on different topics, and is convinced of the importance of sharing and listening to these differing points of view so that people can understand each other. However, Stance also feels responsible, as the school principal, of making sure that parents are receiving accurate information. "So I find that one frustrating and difficult, because it's always going to depend on the listener's point of view more than on mine."

Stance also acknowledges that it takes time to develop good communication skills, and that people need to have opportunities to practice those skills as well. He talks about the importance of being an "active listener," of paraphrasing what the other person has said to make sure that their point of view is well understood. Stance believes that educators and parents both need to learn the "techniques" of good communication in order to become good collaborators.

Feeling listened to is what Anne believes is her strongest need in terms of collaborating with the school. As she reflects on the time she ended up writing a letter of complaint to the Superintendent she says:

> If I look back and [Stance] was to say, "Well, what is it that you were really asking us?" What I was asking was that they listen to me, and not just pat me on the shoulder and say, "yeah, yeah, yeah, we'll watch him,"... that they really listen to me. And that they just pay attention to him. I did feel comfortable that we had talked [at the meeting].

While "feeling listened to" and "having a voice" are among the two parents' strongest needs, the educators speak about how important they believe it is for them to listen to the parents. Clare mentions that she always tries to ask parents for their questions or concerns before she shares her ideas.

Communication is also important for Denae, who says that she would really like to be informed about "everything that's going on." Sometimes, she says, she feels as though she's "in the dark," learning about new programs only after they have been developed and implemented by the school. For example, as she speaks about the Quest program, she says that "it got swept in under the door... All of a sudden I knew that we had it." Her suggestion that there be sub-committees established to address various areas of the school is one way that she thinks people could be better informed, and also "have a voice" in school matters.

Trust, Openness, Honesty

Trust was talked about as an important characteristic in parent-school collaboration by all of the participants. However, not everyone means the same thing when they talk about trust. For example, when Anne talks about wanting to be able to "trust" the school, she is referring to the fact that since she can't be at the school, she doesn't necessarily always know what her child's needs are... "It goes

back to that, he's in a place where I can't be with him, and I have to trust that what they're doing is what's best for him." She wants to be able to "trust" the teacher to notice him specifically, and to "pick up" on what his needs might be. Anne also talked about how much more relaxed she was feeling about Justin's school program this year. This she sees as the result of a number of factors; one of them was that Clare is his teacher, "who I knew and trusted, and I just knew that he was in a good place." Another reason, according to Anne, is that after three years, she has begun to "trust" the school to look after Justin's needs and to recognize his uniqueness.

Denae also speaks about wanting to "trust" the school ("I like to think that we'd be able to work with any of the teachers that our children would get"). However, when Stance talks about trust, he seems to be referring to the importance of parents and educators having a basic belief in the other person's good intentions. Stance says that one of the things that he does intentionally in the school newsletters is "give a lot of messages that we trust parents, that we trust good parenting... And hopefully that will come across to people, to say, 'hey, we're in this together.'" Stance finds himself feeling particularly frustrated with people "who just cannot bring themselves to believe something that you say."

Trust is something that develops over time, and Anne and Clare both talk about how important it is for both parents and educators to realize that. In order for a good relationship to develop, people need to be willing to give it time, and not expect "instant rapport." Clare talks about how developing a relationship with a parent also helps her to see the parent as a person, rather than as someone to be "blamed" for a child's difficulties.

Closely related to the issue of trust is "mutual respect." As Clare points out, although this respect is important, it is not something that happens instantly, but must develop over time:

> To begin with, when you're beginning with the collaboration, you don't even have a working relationship [established] yet, and yet I think you're collaborating already... Collaboration means something conscious, you have to think about it, and go through bad examples, the growing experiences... and when you do, then I think you can collaborate more efficiently.

Bernard and Stance both talk about the importance of parents and educators being open and not defensive towards each other, being willing to listen to each others' viewpoints, and open to compromise and "working things out." When Bernard shared his "negative story," he talked about how there was no opportunity for what he called "face-to-face" negotiation. People did not listen to each other, and there was no opportunity for collaboration to occur.

Stance believes that one of the ways he can tell that collaboration is occurring is when people are open to each other, to hearing the different points of view held by others. This openness is something he refers to as a "non-confrontational regard." It is a quality he describes as a "feeling," when people are "encouraging of one another, and really want other people to say what they think." Stance says that he realizes that at times people don't feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions openly, for fear of hurting someone else's feelings. However, he believes that until everyone truly believes how important it is to be open, it is very difficult to achieve a deeper level of collaboration.

Positive, Supportive, Caring Attitudes

Everyone, parents and educators, talked about the importance of parents and educators being positive and supportive towards one another. There seems to be a very strong agreement that these are indeed the prevailing attitudes at Holy Spirit School.

Clare talked about always making sure that her interactions with parents are positive ones, and that children are discussed in the "most positive light possible."

She talks about how, for her, collaboration has to be based on positives, on an environment of caring. Denae spoke about how much she wants to be supportive and positive in any comments that she makes about the school. Being perceived as "supportive" is very important to Denae; she is concerned about her comments being interpreted as critical ones.

Bernard talks about the importance of parents and educators feeling "relaxed and comfortable" with each other, of giving each other support and positive recognition for what they have to offer. Stance believes that it's very important for the schools to give parents as much positive information as possible. He also talks about the importance of people supporting one another, "buoying one another up," and "not going around being negative." Stance finds that people who are negative "really get in the way" of collaboration.

Personal Connections

In Lindle's (1989) research, establishing personal connections was seen by parents to be the most important characteristic of a collaborative relationship. This finding has also been a significant one in this study, and is recognized by both parents and educators. When Denae speaks about Bernard and her child's "special teacher" Monica, she refers to the way both of these educators make her feel that they care about her and her children ("very affirming"). Denae called this "having a heart" for the children, for the school. For Denae, knowing that the school people "really care" for the children is the most important thing.

Stance talks about how he and the vice-principal do a lot of things "informally," such as calling parents on the telephone to share with them some of the good things that their children have done at school.

Clare also believes that this "personal touch" is an important aspect to consider. She talks about how she establishes a relationship on a first-name basis

with parents, how she makes "face-to-face contact" whenever possible, and makes sure to talk about things with parents that may not be directly related to their child. She says that she knows that a collaborative relationship has been established when there is "an ease, an honesty" in conversation. She also refers to the "bond" that is established between herself and a parent as the reason that a child "has come along as much as he has."

Bernard also believes that making a "personal connection" is essential to collaboration. Educators and parents have to care enough for the children, and for each other, to be willing to take the time to listen to each other. As Bernard says,

> Very often, when a parent comes in and they're so angry, if you really listen, you hear the concern about their kid. You learn the suffering that the family is going through because of this.

Bernard believes that as the "professionals," educators have a greater responsibility to initiate this personal connection.

Being Equals

Each of the participants spoke about the importance of parents and educators seeing each other as equals in order for true collaboration to occur. Denae spoke about how Bernard "never makes you feel like he knows more than ... what you as a parent would know." Denae also spoke about wanting "more say in everything, right from the top down." She sees herself as an equal to the educators in a decision-making capacity, and feels frustrated with the current situation, where she believes that parents have not had much of a voice. Denae says, "I think if you've got a true partnership, you know, you are going to be on the same level."

Clare also talks about how important she thinks it is for parents and teachers to view each other as "equals," and to recognize that each has something very

valuable to contribute to the relationship. She says that educators need to "allow parents to speak, to give their opinions, to tell us how they see the child."

Bernard says that he knows that good parent-school collaboration is occurring when a solution is worked out by including everyone's opinions and thoughts. ("No one come on as a heavy, saying 'this,' neither the parent nor the school, which often it can be either.") He believes that if we don't begin with a strong commitment to equality between parents and the school, "the whole aspect of team is gone."

Another theme related to "being equals," but also to issues of power between parents and educators, has to do with what Bernard and Stance refer to as "role release," the ability to share one's roles with other people who are part of the "team." This ability allows educators to give up some of their "professionalism," and to acknowledge that parents also have a lot to teach them. However, the differences in the roles and responsibilities of the school and the family present some challenges as we think about parent-school collaboration. Stance refers to some things being "home stuff" while others are "school stuff." Here, Stance shares with me how he tries to sort through this question:

> It's something like, in your home you make the decisions about how your family's going to be raised and what's going to happen there. And in the school ... I might make some decisions that you might agree or might not agree with, but in this situation, it seems to me to make the most sense to do it that way... And to say that we recognize that there are differences between home and school, so there are also differences in terms of [appropriate] behavior.
>
> It drives staff up the wall, when I talk to a parent and come back to the staff and say, "Well, maybe we should change things for this child, because our regular consequences are not going to be the most effective way for this child to learn." That drives staff up the wall, 'cause they want everything cut and dried.

Stance says that he thinks the solution is for parents and educators to find ways to "share roles a bit... You still have your predominant role and I have mine, but we can share roles while we still retain our basic responsibilities in our areas."

Power, Conflict, and Roles

Differences in power between parents and educators is an issue that seems to be of concern mainly to the parents. Both parents talked of being worried about how the educators were perceiving them. They feel vulnerable in a way that seems qualitatively different for parents than it does for the educators. As Anne told me about some of her interactions with the school concerning Justin's program, she said, "There were times when I thought they were thinking, 'Here she comes again!'" Similarly, Denae worried that Stance might misinterpret her statements at the PAC meeting where she disagreed with him, and thought that he might think that she was not being "supportive" of him and the school. She was concerned that their relationship might be affected. Denae also worries about the possible impact on her children if she becomes labelled as "fanatical." She says, "I guess I'm intimidated... I have this feeling if I say too much, or say the wrong thing, that somehow my children will be kind of ostracized, or my family will be kept at a distance."

Parents often feel powerless when they interact with school personnel. When Denae speaks about the role of the PAC, she admits that she sees it as "not a very powerful committee, serving more the needs of the hierarchy... of the staff, the administration."

For the educators, there is a concern about what Clare refers to as the "fine line" regarding parents' power to make school decisions. She expresses concern about "how much" ownership parents should have for education... "there's a fine line, I mean, if you cross over it, you wonder what can be taught, if your hands are

tied too." This is also what Stance is referring to when he says that he's never sure at what point it's appropriate to make sure that there are "safeguards" in place. While he talks about this, Stance wonders what it might imply for "true" parent-school collaboration. Stance says that although he recognizes that parents and educators share in responsibilities, there are still some areas where the "lines" have been drawn, at least in an informal way. Stance admits that he finds this confusing, and says he "wrestles all the time" with trying to determine what the "areas" are where parents might have as "full a range of decision-making" as teachers and administrators. Recognizing that we are in a time of changing roles and expectations, he says, "I'm just not sure where the parameters are right now, anymore..."

Clare speaks about the importance of the educators "not intimidating" parents with their professional knowledge, their "big words." Sometimes, though, she thinks that it's the parents who must realize that although they know their own child far better than the teacher does, the teacher can still have something to offer, "new insights as well."

The role of conflict in parent-school collaboration also comes up in most of the interviews. Anne says that "collaboration is sort of like an agreement, where you say, yes, we will work together... There could be times when you're not working well together... so then you go back and you say, o.k., what do we do now, and you have to maybe make some changes."

Not everyone is comfortable with the presence of conflict. Although Stance and Bernard both talk about how important it is for people to disagree honestly and openly, Denae talks about how uncomfortable she feels with conflict and dissension, feeling that "dissension does not serve any purpose." She believes that we should all be ready to set aside our differences in order to focus on the children. She believes that we need to start with our "similarities" rather than our

differences... "I think the child has to come first, and we should be able to put aside any differences for that child."

Bernard, however, believes that if people are truly working together, conflict is inevitable. "[The main thing] is to have everybody working together, not necessarily agreeing, but working together." Bernard is convinced that unless we begin to address areas of conflict, we will be remaining at what he calls a "surface level" in terms of collaboration.

One of the things that Bernard says he has learned in working with an institution like the school system, is that at times institutions approach conflict by saying, "Well, this is the way we should do things, and proceed, and hope for the best." But he personally believes that a better approach is to get everyone working together, by listening and understanding each other's points of view.

Stance also talks about conflict, and how he believes that there needs to be at least a minimum level of "basic agreement" before collaboration between parents and the school can occur. In Stance's negative story, the positions of the parent and the school were "diametrically opposed," and Stance's conclusion is that, as a result, it was impossible for them to collaborate in any way.

School-Wide Commitment

The importance of having a school-wide commitment to collaborative relationships is one that all three educators mentioned. Clare talked about how the atmosphere of "working together" throughout the school has been one of the most important things in establishing parent-school collaboration. She also explains how the administrators' commitment to valuing relationships between home and school has made a big difference. When she recounts her second "positive" story of parent-school collaboration, she mentions that having a substitute teacher brought in to take her class while she attended the meetings with the parents was a good

example of the school's values. As Clare says, collaboration is not something that can happen in isolation; it needs to be a school-wide approach to working with others. Clare says that her "vision" for parent-school collaboration would include "a Stance and a [vice-principal's name], because of the way they run the school."

Stance believes that "all the collaboration" should not come from the principal. That's one of the reasons why he encourages parents to deal directly with their children's teachers whenever possible. Stance says, "if everything has to go through the principal, then we're not getting anywhere, you know."

Denae also refers to the importance of a school-wide approach, when she says that she sees Holy Spirit School as "very upbeat, very positive... I think that's an attitude that prevails across... to all the different families that come to the school. It's valued, it's supported, and it's encouraged." Denae recognizes the important role that the administrator has in establishing this atmosphere, how the attitude of the "boss" permeates the whole school... "My hat goes off to Stance, because I think it's very true, my husband says you can tell the type of staff by the boss... you can tell what goes on behind closed doors."

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

This study resulted in nine "themes" that emerged as the five participants described their thoughts, experiences and opinions about parent-school collaboration. One purpose of this chapter is to discuss these themes, and to return to the literature presented in Chapter Two to further our understanding of parent-school collaboration within the larger context of theory and research. The other purpose of this chapter is to discuss some questions and issues that have been raised as a result of this research, and which I think must be addressed by parents, and even more so by educators, if we wish to establish truly collaborative relationships.

What does it mean for parents and schools to "collaborate?"

I began Chapter Two with a brief discussion of three dictionary definitions of the term "collaboration," each of which has some interesting implications for the topic of parent-school collaboration. As I analyzed the results of this research, I found that the three definitions began to "blend together" in my mind. Although all of the participants found it difficult or even impossible to define or describe collaboration, everyone believed that they had a good sense about when it was, or was not, happening. When I did ask them to try and describe collaboration, participants in this study spoke about collaboration in terms of "team-work," "working together," "partnerships," "vested interest," and "having a common goal."

I invited the participants to examine the term "collaboration," and to think about whether they could distinguish it from two other terms, "a good working

relationship," and "partnership." Everyone said that they saw "collaborating" as a higher level activity than that which is implied by the words "a good working relationship." Some people said that a good working relationship was a prerequisite to collaboration, although Clare and Anne both thought that you might begin "collaborating" even before a good working relationship had been established. For most of the participants, the term "partnership" was closer to the term "collaboration." In fact, Stance defined collaboration as "a partnership, with all stakeholders working together to benefit children." Anne saw collaboration and partnership as very similar concepts, because both include the notion of "vested interests." For Denae, partnership and collaboration are also closely related, because to her both imply that the participants are "on the same level."

I deliberately avoided using the term "parent involvement" throughout my various discussions with the participants, based largely on the comments of Epstein (1994) and Christenson et al (1992), about how parent involvement tends to imply a "one-way" relationship, focusing on the parents' role only. From my perspective, collaboration focuses more on the **relationship** between parents and the school than does "parent involvement." Surprisingly, none of the participants themselves used the term parent involvement (the most commonly used term until the late 1980's), which leads me to think that our common language is indeed changing.

Participants disagreed about whether or not it was "always possible" for collaboration to occur between parents and teachers. Stance, for example, thought that there needs to be a "basic level of agreement" before people can collaborate, whereas both Clare and Bernard believe that almost anything can be worked out, if only there is a commitment to communicate honestly and make compromises. Clare talked about her beliefs that "you won't get the same level of collaboration with

some parents, you won't get the same type ... with everyone, but I think there can still be some collaboration."

As I return to Hord's (1986) discussion of the collaboration literature, and the distinction between "collaboration" and "cooperation," it seems that the distinctions made by the participants in this study support her conclusion that "collaboration" is a higher-level activity. The participants in this study saw collaboration largely as a "relational system" (Appley & Winder, 1977). Many of the characteristics of collaboration proposed by Cook and Friend (1991) were also identified by the participants in this study. These include the importance of sharing a common goal ("we're doing this for the benefit of the children"), acknowledging parity among parents and educators, and sharing responsibility for decisions. The "emergent characteristics" proposed by Cook and Friend (1991) were also recognized by the participants; for example, Clare said that "trust" in one another is required for collaboration to occur, but that "trust" generally develops and increases as people work together.

The four characteristics of collaboration identified by Moore and Littlejohn (1992) were also mentioned frequently by participants in this study. These included:

- the "top-down" approach, where there is leadership, commitment, and support from the administrators, both in philosophical and concrete terms. Parents and educators in this study recognized the importance of the **"school-wide commitment"** to working collaboratively with parents.
- acknowledging and acting on the changing role of parents and educators, with a willingness on everyone's part to learn new ways (and teamwork seen as the critical element that makes collaboration happen). **Change** was one of the major themes

that emerged from this study. Everyone recognizes that we are in a time of change, and has a sense that this will require new learnings for educators as well as parents.

- valuing all persons for their perspectives and contributions, which means that everyone must be willing to listen and negotiate. This relates closely to the themes of **communication** and **trust/openness/honesty**.
- allowing for false starts, and providing support to both parents and educators in their efforts to work together. This characteristic is related to our theme of **positive, supportive, caring attitudes**. Participants in this study recognized the importance of parents and educators to be tolerant of each others, to be supportive and positive towards one another, and to recognize that at times we will all make "mistakes."

Discussion of some specific themes

Children live in two worlds, home and school

Research has repeatedly identified parent and home environment variables as among the most important factors in school achievement. Relationships between parents and the school are part of a complex ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Epstein, 1992). All of the participants in this study recognize that a child's academic success is in large part determined by the congruence between home and school.

Lightfoot (1978) proposed that the sharing of knowledge concerning the child's experiences at home and at school would help both the teacher and the parents in their respective roles as facilitators of the child's education. This belief was shared strongly by the participants in this study. For example, Clare talked

about how important it was that she, as a teacher, knows about the child's life at home, and that she tells parents what she sees happening at school. Denae spoke from the parent's perspective, saying that she often wished she heard more from the teachers, "just a note or a phone call," about how her children were doing at school.

For some participants, the sense of diffuse boundaries between home and school seems to be even stronger for children with special needs. Anne talked about how her interest in collaborating with the school became strong only after her second child, Justin, was in school. With Julie, her oldest, there were no "problems," so the need for her to work closely with the schools was not as strong. Clare talked about the frequent contact she had with the parents of children who were having various "difficulties," and added, "I wish I could say to you, of course I phone all the parents, but no, I don't... And yet, it's important."

Changes in society

The relationship between parents and schools has been receiving increasing attention over the past twenty years, as more and more parents have been challenging the traditional, "accepting, passive" role of parents. This has been particularly the case in the area of special education (Garfunkel, 1986). Educators have mixed feelings about the changes that they see coming in terms of parent-school collaboration. They recognize that it will take more time and more skill on their part to work with parents. They also echo some of Ost's (1988) conclusions about the growing importance of improved parent-teacher interactions.

Two of the participants in this study spoke about how collaboration can be seen on different "levels". Bernard and Stance both talked about how they thought that educators in general are still operating at a "surface" level in terms of their relationships with parents, and have a long way to go before they are truly collaborating with parents. Even at their school, with educators who consider

themselves open to working in partnership with parents, collaboration is really just at the beginning stages. Stance told me at one of our later meetings, after he had time to read the transcript of his interview: "You know, Marianne, in education, we don't truly partner with parents." This was when Stance told me he had decided to include parents in setting goals for the schools, something that until now has been done by the staff. He also told me that he wasn't sure "how far the staff will want to go" in terms of involving parents in this process. It seems to me that Stance anticipates some strong staff resistance to this type of collaborative activity with parents.

It also seems that participants know there's more to collaboration than what they've experienced, but no one at this point seems quite sure what true collaboration might actually look like or consist of. The relationship between schools and parents is in a period of change, and we are "breaking new ground" in re-defining the nature of that relationship.

Personal connections and equality

Lindle (1989), and Lindle and Boyd (1991), in reporting on the parents' preferences regarding their relationship with educators, spoke about the importance of what they called a "personal touch." Parents were unhappy with educators who were too businesslike or patronizing, and said they particularly appreciated informal contacts with the school. In this study, both parents and educators stressed the importance of such "personal connections." For example, Stance talked about all the things that are done informally at the school, such as phone calls to parents to tell them about some of the good things their children have done at school. Clare spoke about making frequent phone calls to parents at home, to keep them informed about the children. She also said that she presented herself on a first-name basis

with the parents. Bernard said that he thought it was crucial to make "face-to-face communication."

Another one of Lindle's (1989) conclusions was that parents don't want a "professional-client" relationship with the school. They want to be seen as equal partners with schools in the rearing of children. The whole issue of equality or **parity** was a theme that was mentioned by all of the participants in this study as well. Both parents mentioned feeling resentful of the attitudes of educators when they felt that their thoughts were not considered as important as those of the "professionals." Their expectation is that they should be treated as equal partners in making decisions about their children's education (Lindle and Boyd, 1991). They want to feel that their views will be valued equally with those of the educators.

As Bardak (1994) suggests, parity among participants may be incompatible with a hierarchical organization, where the principal and the teachers have been viewed as the "leaders" in educational decision-making.

Power, conflict, and roles

"Power," and differences in the power of parents versus that of the educators, is more of an issue for parents than it is for the educators. When Denae says, "it's like it's a partnership as long as we all agree," she is telling me that she doesn't feel that parents have as much power as the educators in making decisions at the school.

When Stance and Clare talk about the "fine line" between sharing decision-making with parents and maintaining the autonomy of professional educators, they seem to be alluding to the balance theory proposed by Litwak and Meyer (1974). Litwak and Meyer suggest that effective school-parent relations require a "happy medium" between intrusive parental involvement and completely autonomous professionals, calling attention to the different roles of the "experts" (educators)

versus the "non-experts" (parents). This is a concern that is not shared by the parents in this study, and that also seems incompatible in some ways with the notion of "parity" among parents and educators.

Lightfoot (1978) suggested that parents and schools are "inherently" in conflict, and this natural tension is expressed through the comments made by both Clare and Anne, when they talk about how the parent's concern for the child is qualitatively different than the educators' concern could ever be. As Lightfoot says, these positional differences are even greater when children have disabilities (as in Anne's case) or when parents and schools have differing views about what the form and content of education should be (as in Denae's situation).

Fine (1993) proposed that questions of power must be addressed within any consideration of parent participation in schools, since the relationship between parents and educators is not a "power-neutral" one. Both parents in this study expressed concerns about their feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness vis-a-vis the school. Like Epstein (1993), however, they believe that the solution to these concerns lies in better "information," "communication," and "participation." These parents want to be seen as "partners" rather than as "clients" of the school system. (Wolfendale, 1983).

Roles and role conflict was another issue that emerged from this study. Both Stance and Bernard talked about how a collaborative relationship with parents will require that educators become more flexible about their roles. Role flexibility is one of the "structural components" of collaboration that was found in another recent study as well (Bardak, 1994). Participants in this study saw their roles as evolving and changing; as a principal, this was a particular challenge to Stance, who feels that there is a need to clarify roles and responsibilities of both parents and educators as a result of a change to a more collaborative relationship.

School-wide commitment

Ost (1988) proposed that any efforts for improving school-parent interactions should be made within the context of the school community as a whole. He recognized that although individual teachers can make a difference, the effect is minimal if the effort is not part of a school-wide commitment. This idea is strongly supported by this study. All the participants talked about how important it is that the administration and staff at Holy Spirit School all share similar beliefs about working in a collaborative fashion. Many also mentioned the crucial role that the administrators have in establishing this school-wide commitment.

Collaboration starts at the school level. It's highly doubtful that educators who are not engaged in collaborative relationships among themselves will engage in collaborative relationships with parents.

Differences between parents and educators

Although I found it very difficult to draw conclusions from only two parents and three educators, there were a few differences. Looking first at the thoughts expressed by the parents, one difference between the two was that Anne saw collaboration at the individual (child) level, while Denae spoke more about decision-making at a school-wide level. I think this difference in perspective and "focus" is largely due the major differences in their individual circumstances (Anne having a child with some very special needs), and also because Denae has been involved with the PAC this past year, which has given her a different kind of experience than Anne's. In terms of similarities between them, both parents recognize and appreciate the efforts made by the school to inform and welcome parents. They both feel that being consulted about decisions is very important (for Anne, it's about her children; for Denae, it's at a school level). Denae expressed

some of the concerns described by Ost (1988) in terms of feeling "disenfranchised" from the schooling process. She speaks of the PAC not being a very powerful committee, serving mostly the needs of the school and its administration. Similarly, Anne spoke about feeling that her opinions about her son's needs were not being "heard" by the school administrators.

Being able to trust the school is very important to both parents. For them, trusting the school means knowing that the educators are caring for their children, and are able and willing to meet the needs of the children. Both parents shared feeling of vulnerability vis-a-vis the school, and concerns about how they might be viewed by the school, and how this might in turn affect their children. The educators in this study did not speak of feeling vulnerable vis-a-vis the parents, but they shared an interest in hearing from them in honest and open exchanges.

The educators in this study also spoke about the importance of "trust," but they were referring more to the importance of parents being willing to trust them as educators. However, all three educators in this study see the "ideal" relationship with parents as one that goes beyond parents merely being "supportive" of the school. At the same time, they expressed concerns about "how far" they can go in terms of sharing their power with parents before they lose some essential autonomy as professionals. They seem to be looking for some "balance," (Litwak and Meyer, 1974), and in this sense are sharing the concerns that naturally come as the roles of parents in the education process are being re-examined.

Questions and Issues that have been raised for me by this research

The following is a list of questions and "issues" that reflect some of the thoughts that I have documented in my reflective journal throughout the process of carrying out the study and presenting the findings:

1. How does a hierarchical organization come to collaboration? Is it possible?

The concept of "parity" appears to be basic to both the literature and research on collaboration. However, parity seems incompatible with some of the aspects of a hierarchy, where not all members' expertise is equally valued. At present, schools tend to be organized hierarchically. (Perhaps what is important is that there be equality between educators and parents. Is it possible that how the educational system organizes itself is not the issue?)

2. The role of mothers as the main "parents" who collaborate with the schools.

In this study, the two parent-participants were both mothers rather than fathers. This is not particularly surprising, given the reality that in the majority of cases, it is the "mother" alone (occasionally the mother with the father, but rarely the father alone) with whom teachers communicate about the students. In the past year, the Parent Advisory Committee at Holy Spirit School has consisted entirely of mothers.

My question here has to do with the role of fathers in parent-school collaboration, and a "wondering" about how the findings of this study might have been different if I had interviewed two fathers instead of two mothers. In both Bernard and Stance's "negative" stories of collaboration, it was a father who was predominantly involved; in all of the "positive" stories shared by the educators, mothers were the main parent concerned.

3. Does most parent-school collaboration still revolve around students with special needs (does the squeaky wheel get the grease?)

In most of the "positive" stories of collaboration shared by the educators, the child concerned was a student with special needs. I had deliberately set out to ask people to describe parent-school collaboration without focussing on children

who were having difficulties, and yet the stories I received seemed to all revolve around conflicts or students with problems of some kind.

4. Does "collaboration" happen more when we are in conflict, not getting along, not trusting each other?

This question is somewhat connected to the previous one, in that I have also wondered whether we actually find ourselves "needing to collaborate" more when we have conflicts or difficulties of one type or another. It certainly seems to have been the case in a number of the examples given by the participants of this study. For example, Anne said that with her first child, who was "just sailing along in school," she never saw any need for collaborating or "working with" the school.

5. Is there a need for roles/responsibilities (of parents and of educators) to be clarified before engaging in some collaborative activities?

As Stance says, "The more you open things up, the more clarification of roles/responsibilities needs to be worked out." On the other hand, to try and clarify roles may be inconsistent with the need to be flexible in terms of roles, and to share the power rather than to try and "divide it up."

6. Why was there was so little emphasis among the participants of this study on parents being involved in children's learning activities?

Epstein's research (1992) shows that everyone (students, parents, and educators) benefits the most when schools and parents collaborate on curricular issues. This fact was not mentioned directly by any of the participants, and was only indirectly alluded to. For example, when Denae talked wistfully about wanting to hear more often from her children's teachers; when Bernard talked about teachers asking parents to share their knowledge about how their children

learned best. It would seem that current research is not "informing" the practices at this particular school.

7. Who has the greater responsibility for initiating a collaborative relationship between parents and schools?

Bernard said that his vision of parent-school collaboration would be "the school embracing parents as full members of their team." This statement seems particularly significant, in that it gives much greater responsibility to the school for initiating collaboration. Stance also seemed to believe that it was up to the educators to develop the skills and knowledge to work more effectively with parents in a collaborative way. Clare believed that it was her responsibility to initiate contact with parents, to put them at ease and to welcome their ideas and suggestions. Although neither one addressed this question directly, it was my sense that the parents in this study would agree that the educators have the greater responsibility for initiating a collaborative relationship. They would probably say this based on their feelings that the school-parent relationship is not at present a "power-neutral" one, and that the educators have much greater power than do parents.

8. How can educators ensure that their "professionalism" does not get in the way of collaboration with parents?

This is probably one of the most difficult issues to address in this area. How does a "professional" truly collaborate with a "non-professional?"

CHAPTER 6

REFLECTIONS ON THE STUDY

Schools and parents face a challenge to work together to provide the necessary education and support that children need. To do this, parents must continue to be involved with the schools, and schools must continue to reach out to parents... Strong parent-teacher collaboration will be needed to ensure continuity in care and education, and support for children of all income levels and ethnic backgrounds. A concerted effort by all those involved with children's welfare is essential if we are to meet the needs of the coming generation successfully. Parent-teacher collaboration will help provide avenues for children to find success both in and out of school, but both parents and teachers must recognize their responsibilities. Neither can expect the other to accomplish the task alone, it is a collaborative effort. (Berger, 1991, 217-218)

The question that began this study was: **"How do parents, teachers, counsellors and principals describe parent-school collaboration?"**

The term **"parent-school collaboration"** is a relatively recent one in education, reflecting a significant societal "paradigm shift" that is also occurring in other institutions such as health care and social services. Parents and schools have shared responsibility for children's education ever since public schools have come into existence, but the recognition that parents might have "equal rights" in educational decision-making is a concept that has only emerged over the past two or three decades (Cross, 1989). It is becoming an increasingly accepted fact that education, like other social services in our democratic society, is everybody's business; it is especially the business of those parents who have children in schools.

As I reviewed the current literature on parent-school relationships, one of the most significant issues to emerge for me was how the terms "parent involvement," "school-family partnerships," and "parent-school collaboration" all tend to be used frequently and, at times, interchangeably. My conclusion from this study and from my reading is that there is a significant difference between the first

term, "parent involvement," and the two latter terms, "school-family partnerships" and "parent-school collaboration." In the first term, the focus is on what **parents** do, although teachers, administrators, and counsellors are necessarily involved in promoting or discouraging "parent involvement" with the school. However, when we speak of "partnerships" or "collaboration," the focus is on the role of both **parents and educators**, and on how the two parties "work together." It seems clear that increased "parent involvement" does not necessarily imply increased "partnership" or "collaboration" between parents and the school. On the other hand, increased "collaboration" is more likely (although not necessarily) to result in greater "parent involvement."

As I planned and designed this study, I decided that it would be worthwhile to study how the people involved currently understand the term **"parent-school collaboration."** It occurred to me that the way in which people describe the concept would have implications for the relationships that are established between parents and educators. As I analyzed the findings of this study, I realized that the participants have at least an implicit understanding of the above distinction between parent involvement and parent-school collaboration. Participants spoke about the ways in which parents and educators "worked together" (or failed to "work together"), and there was very little concern with "how to get parents involved."

Garfunkel (1986) has argued that, to the extent that partnership implies equality, to speak of parent-school partnerships is misleading because there is no provision in public education for parents to be enfranchised as equal partners in the educational process. His perspective, as well as the findings of this study, reinforces my position that we are in the midst of a "paradigm shift" with respect to the role of parents in education. The dilemma that this raises is that the prevailing practices, with a "partnership" that has largely left educational decision-making to professional educators, is no longer being accepted by many parents and educators.

In a sense, there are two important factors to consider here, one more philosophical and the other a more practical consideration:

(1) A changing societal "paradigm," where parents are no longer willing to let the "professional educators" have sole responsibility for decision-making.

(2) All the research that documents the contributions of parent involvement to positive student outcomes (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991).

Participants' Suggestions

The participants in this study shared many ideas that could be considered as "guidelines" for parents and educators who wish to develop a deeper level of parent-school collaboration:

1. Parents need to take a stronger interest in their child's education, and not be intimidated by educators. One of Anne's statements is very relevant here:

> I know I look at my parents, and I mean, when I grew up, you didn't question what they said, you just went with it, and... I think now it has to be different. They're not God, and they don't know everything, and you have to communicate.

2. Since the manner in which parents approach the school is so important, they need however to be aware that teachers and administrators will be more likely to respond positively when approached in a similar fashion. Bernard talked about how parents need to question more, but that they need to be careful to do this in a "supportive" manner. He recognizes that school people have at times reacted defensively to parent requests because of the manner in which parents approach the school. In his role as a counsellor, Bernard says he often encourages parents to go to the school administrators, and question their child's placement or program, but to be careful about how they do this. Bernard thinks that parents need to recognize their own expertise and knowledge concerning their children, and not accept the "educational experts" blindly.

3. Clare believes that parents can play an important role in promoting collaboration between the home and the school, by taking the initiative in communicating with the teacher. She also talks about how important the parents' acknowledgment of the teacher can be ("giving feedback, the warm fuzzies").

4. Denae also thinks that there needs to be a way to get a larger number of parents informed about things that are happening at the schools, and involved in decision-making. She recognizes that the school is already doing many things to promote parent-school collaboration, particularly in the way of inviting parents into the schools, making them feel welcome and comfortable. However, she says that she wishes she heard more from her kids' teachers, "like just a phone call or a note." Here she seems to be alluding to a wish for more communication from the school about how her own children are doing, but she adds, "I think maybe that's unrealistic, 'cause they're so busy."

5. Anne said that at times, she felt that the educators were resentful that she was being so "proactive." On the other hand, she thought that they should not expect parents to automatically trust them just because "they are the educators."

> What was coming across [in one meeting she had with the administrators]...they're in the education business, and I should trust that they know what they're doing... I thought, yeah, you are an educator, and I'm an RN, we have different backgrounds, and I can't say where Justin is in terms of his education, or if he's having difficulties, I can only go by what I think I know... and they may be the educators, but I'm his mother? And if I know him better than they do, then they should also listen to me?
>
> It's not that they don't listen, but I still sense that there's this attitude of, "We're the educators, this is our business, this is our specialty, and you have to trust us"... And while I've been able to trust them because I feel that he's in a good place, I don't think they should have that attitude.

Denae also talks about the "attitudes" of the educators towards parents... "I wonder, if it came down to the bottom line, if it still wouldn't be, 'well, we here know best, because we really are the educators, and we're the ones that have gone

to all these seminars and conferences,'... it's like a partnership as long as we all agree." Here Denae seems to be saying something very similar to Garfunkel (1986), who suggests that a "partnership" approach is basically one of maintaining the status quo. Interestingly, Bernard also talks about the "attitudes of the school personnel" as one of the major barriers to parent-school collaboration. This is strikingly different from the results of the Leitch and Tangri (1988) study, which found that the greatest barrier to collaboration, as identified by both teachers and parents, had to do with the parents. Bernard believes that educators at times get their "professional backs" up, and feel that parents have no right to question the school. However, Bernard thinks that as part of their professional training, educators need to develop greater skills in working with parents, and to develop greater openness and flexibility in terms of how to solve problems.

6. Conflict in values is something that can lead to a barrier in parent-school collaboration. Denae was particularly articulate on this point; because of her strong Christian beliefs, Denae finds herself feeling critical at times of some of the things she sees happening at the school. Stance also talked about the importance of parents and schools having some agreement in values, when he shared his convictions that in order for collaboration to occur, there needs to be at least some "basic agreement."

7. The lack of linkages between the medical world and the educational community was a barrier that was only mentioned by Anne. This is understandable, when one considers the special nature of the circumstances with her son Justin. When the psychologist from the Cancer Institute became available to visit the school, Anne felt that her own relationship with the school improved tremendously. She no longer feels solely responsible for convincing the educators about Justin's special needs, and also believes that the psychologist's presence at the school has made a difference for the school people:

> Clare explained to me the other day, after [the psychologist] had made a visit, she said, 'it kind of validates what you're saying, it's not just a parent saying, it's somebody who is part of a medical team who is validating what you've been telling us.

8. Parents and educators need to recognize that the relationship between themselves will always have an element of tension, due to the different nature of their "vested interest" in the individual child. Anne also talks about this issue, which is also addressed by Lightfoot (1978), when she recognizes that the school's "investment" in her child's education can never match the intensity of her own:

> I just see that my interest and concern for my children is probably 90%... and I hate to put a percentage on it, but I'm sure it's stronger than the interest the school has in them... because they're not, I mean, they have 350 kids, or however many kids, so their investment in my children's education is not the same as mine, my investment... I appreciate that, and I don't want my children to be the only ones in the school and to have their undivided attention, but they need to know how important they are to me. And if I come to the school and request certain things, they need to know that it's not because I think they're incompetent, or they can't do their job... So they don't take comments as an affront to their pride, or whatever.

Clare addresses this issue as well, when she recognizes that parents and educators can never be "equals" in their concern over the child, since the parent will generally be more concerned.

9. The educators identified some barriers to collaboration that were not mentioned by the parents. The biggest one for Clare, as a teacher, has to do with the sheer limits on her time. Defining collaboration primarily in terms of communication between herself and the parents, it is not surprising that she sometimes finds that her "time and energy" quite simply run out! Clare also recognizes that perceptions and expectations can also be barriers, either those held by parents of those of the educators. Stance sees that people "not listening" to each other is a major barrier to collaboration, as well as people who have a "hidden

agenda or an axe to grind, but they don't come out and just talk about it and deal with it, so it's in behind them, and you don't know what it is." In a sense, the hidden agenda brings us back to the importance of parents and educators being open with one another.

10. There is a clear need for educator flexibility to meet the different needs of parents... Not everyone wants the same type of "collaboration." However, the basis "themes" remain the same, i.e. trust, openness, equality, etc. (Collaboration as communication/decision-making about individual children, vs. collaboration as communication/decision-making at a broader, or school-wide level.)

Researcher's Recommendations

The following would be my main recommendations, based on the findings from this study. In order to achieve parent-school collaboration, educators will first have to make what I would call a "philosophical commitment" to parents' right to have an equal voice in educational decision-making. I believe that in order to be truly effective, this commitment has to begin at the administrative level of the school, i.e. principal and vice-principal, but it also needs to be adopted by all of the educators on staff. The next step is to establish a mechanism for the parents' voice to be equally heard; this is where I believe that the establishment of a School Council (rather than a Parent Advisory Council) comes in. This School Council would need to consist of a fairly equal representation from parents, school administration and staff, and perhaps one or two community members who are not parents of children in the school. In addition to establishing school goals, this Council would assume responsibility for broad educational decision-making, and for resolution of conflicts that will naturally occur from time to time. This Council could also ensure that individual needs or wishes of parents or educators not take

precedence over generally accepted school goals, or over the rights of the general school population.

What is the Role of the School Counsellor?

Epstein (1992) notes that few leaders in the field of school-family relations have been school psychologists or counsellors, in spite of the "natural connections" between their skills and interests, and the needs of schools for better school and family connections. Over ten years ago, Lombana and Lombana (1982) suggested that if parent-school partnerships are to be strengthened in the face of opposing cultural, geographic, and attitudinal forces, school counsellors should be assuming leadership roles in the school, in developing and implementing plans for working with parents. They also stressed that these must be plans that meet the *expressed* parental needs, as well as ensure the most productive use of available resources. Lombana and Lombana (1982) proposed a model of home-school collaboration that places primary emphasis on "parent involvement" and "parent conferences." The other two areas, (where counsellors have more often devoted their efforts), parent education and parent counselling, are not as efficient in terms of time required. Noting that teachers and administrators are generally ill-prepared in terms of working with parents, Lombana and Lombana (1982) advocated for counsellors to take a more active role within the school in consulting with and supporting teachers in their work with parents.

The ideas proposed by Lombana and Lombana (1982) are closely related to those of Weiss and Edwards (1992), who suggest that school psychologists might assume the role of "family-school coordinators;" and Epstein (1992) who advocates for the counsellor to become the "psychologist of the school." There have been some long-standing debates about ways for school psychologists to broaden their influence by working with all staff, students, and families (Epstein,

1992); and to extend some of the "special education" practices to all families in a school. In order for school psychologists to take on the leadership role in family and school connections, there will need to be some changes in the educational and training programs of the psychologists, as well as administrative support for this new role.

Implications for Further Research

This research has provided us with an understanding of how two parents, a teacher, a counsellor, and a principal describe parent-school collaboration. Future research on collaborative relationships between educators and parents, based on the findings of this study, may explore some of the following areas:

1. A replication of this study with a larger number of parents and educators, representing a variety of school settings in a variety of socio-economic settings.

2. A case study of a school where a specific program for implementing parent-school collaboration has already been successfully established, to evaluate which practices have been particularly successful, and to provide greater specificity regarding approaches to collaboration.

3. Case studies of parent-principal collaboration, of parent-teacher collaboration, and of parent-counsellor collaboration, to examine the similarities and differences among the above studies.

4. A study on the effects of collaborative efforts (on the part of the adults) on the students.

5. Any one (or group) of themes that have emerged from this study could be explored further, to gain a fuller understanding of that theme's impact on collaboration between parents and educators (for example, the importance of equality, or of a school-wide commitment to collaborating with parents).

6. A study on how the "barriers" identified in this study might be (or are currently being) reduced.

7. A study of the "link" between the professional preparation of educators and their collaboration with parents.

8. A study of school counsellors' and school psychologists' attitudes and beliefs regarding parent-school relationships, and the impact of these attitudes on teachers and administrators in a school.

9. A study that explores how parent-school collaboration changes as the students get older.

10. A study of students' perspectives on collaboration between the home and the school.

11. It would be interesting to study the different "foci" of collaboration, i.e. with respect to individual children and with respect to the entire student body.

12. Finally, I think that a "school development" program could be developed to assist educators and parents who have expressed interest in developing more collaborative relationships, and the implementation of this program could be evaluated.

CHAPTER SEVEN

EPILOGUE

As I listened to the participants in this study describe their thoughts, opinions, and experiences about parent-school collaboration, I was struck by their honesty and the depth of their caring for children and for education. I kept a reflective journal as I carried out this study, and decided to share the contents of some of the entries. There are three main issues that have been highlighted by this research:

1. The role of children and our (adult) perceptions of children.
2. The use of language, and its impact on relationships between educators and parents.
3. How "realistic" is this goal of parent-school collaboration?

The Role of Children

Throughout this thesis, the children's voices are essentially silent. Just as in Lightfoot's (1978) book, **Worlds Apart**, even though the children are the focus, they are seen through the eyes of the parents and the educators. However, perceptions of children are at the center of the relationships of the adults in this study. Lightfoot suggested that these conceptions of the nature of childhood shape and determine the interactions of parents and teachers. Also, the extent to which parents and teachers are able to see themselves separate from the child, and are able to see the child as a whole person, probably has a great deal to do with the degree of tension and conflict that the adults experience as they attempt to collaborate.

In Lightfoot's study, "mothers who were overidentified and deeply connected with their children were described as creating the most turmoil in the

lives of the teachers. Because the mother was not able to differentiate the child's separateness and wholeness, she became locked in a struggle with the teacher, whose purpose it was to support the child's independence from family and provide an alternative environment for learning and growing. In a similar sense, teachers who are unable to perceive the individuality and wholeness of the child are likely to be overly focused on parents as potentially intrusive forces and therefore are prone to building walls of silence and exclusion in relation to parents." (p. 210)

Use of Language

My concern about the term "collaboration" has been an ongoing one throughout this research process. I chose to use the term because of its current popularity in educational circles, as well as because of my own affinity for working in a collaborative fashion. As I read, thought, conducted the interviews and the subsequent analysis, and discussed the issue with numerous friends and colleagues, I realize how the term itself creates difficulties. I have recently come to the conclusion that the term "collaboration" is not particularly useful in terms of parent-school relationships. I like Epstein's term "partnership" better. It does seem to me that collaboration seems to occur more when we are having difficulties, whereas partnership implies more of a long-term, ongoing relationship.

However, I've also been intrigued by Garfunkel's article suggesting that partnerships are a way of maintaining the status quo, and that if we are really wanting change, we should be talking more about advocacy.

I'm bothered by some of the "language" that is currently being used by politicians and bureaucrats when the area of parent-school relationships is discussed. Especially now, when representatives of Alberta Education have been talking about giving parents more "control" over decision-making, as stated in Bill 19, the amendments to the School Act. This is the language of power, isn't it? If

one group is gaining more control, it automatically implies that another group will be losing control. The "language of collaboration" is qualitatively different than this.

What might a "win-win" situation with respect to parent-school collaboration look like? Is there a limited amount of "power", i.e. if parents begin to assume greater power, have more involvement and participation in the schools, does that mean that educators have to "lose" some of their power/control? Might **collaboration** be the key to having these "win-win" situations?

Bill 19 also requires that each school establish a "School Council," whose roles and responsibilities have yet to be defined. These Councils could be a great vehicle for establishing more collaborative relationships between schools and parents. A very important questions seems to be: How can educators remain "the professionals," and still be more open to working with people other than their students, i.e. the parents? We may need to think about re-defining the "professionalism" of educators to mean working with parents as well as students.

How Realistic is this Goal?

As I was writing the last part of my literature review, I suddenly remembered very clearly one of the things Joyce Epstein said when I heard her speak at a conference in Banff in May, 1994. She was talking about the "Goals 2000" that have been recently set by the U.S. Congress, "goals" that the education system is to have met by the year 2000. Joyce said that she thought with some of these goals, there must be some mistake, the Congress should have said the year 3000, not 2000 -- for example, the goal that U.S. students would be first in the world in terms of Math and Science. However, she said that there was one goal that she believes is perfectly attainable, given the will and the work to achieve it: that is, the goal that all schools will, by the year 2000, have established parent

participation programs. Epstein believes that a 3-to-5 year plan for achieving school and family partnerships is a realistic goal for all schools.

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Appendix A: Consent Form for Participants

Parents and Schools Working Together: A Study of Parent-School Collaboration

Researcher: Marianne Gareau, M.Ed. Student in Educational Psychology
University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta
Phone: 469-9975 (home)

Supervisor: Dr. Don Sawatzky

I understand that I am volunteering to participate in a study in which I will be asked to describe my thoughts, beliefs, and experiences with respect to parent-school collaboration. I am willing to share my thoughts and experiences with the researcher, but I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice, and that I do not have to answer any questions that I do not want to answer.

I understand that the interview will take about 45 to 60 minutes, and will be audiotaped; the researcher will later transcribe and analyze the interview. I also understand that I will be asked to review the transcription and analysis of my interview at a later date.

Information obtained from the interview will be used for Marianne Gareau's Master's Degree Thesis and possible future publications.

The study has been explained to me, and I have had the chance to ask questions about the study. I understand that the name of the school and my identity will be kept confidential, by changing my name and identifying factors whenever possible, in any reports written about the study. The audiotapes will be kept secure, and will be destroyed when the study is completed.

I am satisfied that I have been given sufficient information about the study, and I am willing to participate in the study by sharing my thoughts and experiences.

_____ _____

Date Participant

_____ _____

Date Researcher

Appendix B

Interview Guide for Educators

Before we begin this interview, I'd like to remind you once again about my research topic. I'm trying to learn how parents, teachers, school counsellors, and principals each describe parent-school collaboration: what they think is important, some of the experiences they have had, how it does or does not come about, what kinds of things they can do to ensure that it does happen, and what their "vision" of parent-school collaboration consists of.

Question: How do parents, teachers, school counsellors, and principals describe parent-school collaboration?

1. Tell me about parents and schools working together....

2. How do you know when parent-school collaboration is occurring?

3. If I were watching you interact with parents, what are some things I might see you doing?

4. Please talk to me about a specific time recently when you though that you were working collaboratively with parents...
   (Some of the probing questions that I might ask include the following:)
   Who was there?
   Where was this taking place?
   What was the "agenda"?
   How did you prepare for this encounter?
   Can you remember some of the actual words that were spoken , by you and by the parents?
   What feelings did you experience at different times during the encounter?
   What did you notice about the parents' body language? How did the parents react?
   How did you feel at the end of this encounter?
   What kinds of things did you do as follow-up to this encounter?

5. You've talked about some of the things that you do to encourage parent-school collaboration. Can you tell me what you think are some things that **parents** can do to promote such collaboration?

6. Will you describe a situation where you thought that collaboration was **not** occurring?
   (Some of the probing questions that I might ask include the following:)
   Who was there?
   Where was this taking place?
   What was the "agenda"?

How did you prepare for this encounter?
Can you remember some of the actual words that were spoken , by you and by the parents?
What feelings did you experience at different times during the encounter?
What did you notice about the parents' body language? How did the parents react?
How did you feel at the end of this encounter?
What kinds of things did you do as follow-up to this encounter?

7. If I wanted to understand what "parent-school collaboration" means to you, what would I need to know? (What questions could I ask?)

8. What difficulties/barriers have you experienced when you have tried to develop collaboration between school and parents?

9. I'd like to ask you a few questions about your personal background: your age, your educational and work experience, family information, community involvement, special interests, etc.....

10. Is there anything else I need to know about you to best understand your responses?

11. After discussing this topic, how would you define parent-school collaboration? (What differences do you see between "collaboration" and "a good working relationship"? Between "collaboration" and "partnership"?)

12. **"Vision"** question: What are some ways you would like to see parents and schools collaborating/working together?

Interview Guide for Parents

Before we begin this interview, I'd like to remind you once again about my research topic. I'm trying to learn how parents, teachers, school counsellors, and principals each describe parent-school collaboration: what they think is important, some of the experiences they have had, how it does or does not come about, what kinds of things they can do to ensure that it does happen, and what their "vision" of parent-school collaboration consists of.

Question: How do parents, teachers, school counsellors, and principals describe parent-school collaboration?

1. Please tell me about your family: how old are your children, what grades are they in, how long have they attended this school? What kinds of community activities are you involved in? What are your occupations?

2. When was the last time you spoke with a teacher or principal at the school? (Describe the circumstances.)

3. Please talk to me about a specific time recently when you though that you were working well (collaboratively) with the school...

(Some of the probing questions that I might ask include the following:)
Who was there?
Where was this taking place?
What was the "agenda"?
How did you prepare for this encounter?
Can you remember some of the actual words that were spoken , by you and by the teachers and/or principal?
What feelings did you experience at different times during the encounter?
What did you notice about the educators' body language? How did the educator react?
How did you feel at the end of this encounter?
What kinds of things did you do as follow-up to this encounter?

4. You've talked about some of the times where you thought you were working well with the school. Can you tell me what you think are some things that **educators** can do to promote such collaboration? What do you think **parents** can do to promote collaboration with the school?

5. Will you describe a situation where you **didn't think** that you were working well (collaboratively) with the school...

(Some of the probing questions that I might ask include the following:)
Who was there?
Where was this taking place?
What was the "agenda"?
How did you prepare for this encounter?
Can you remember some of the actual words that were spoken, by you and by the educators?

What feelings did you experience at different times during the encounter?
What did you notice about the educators' body language? How did the educators react?
How did you feel at the end of this encounter?
What kinds of things did you do as follow-up to this encounter?

6. If I wanted to understand what "parent-school collaboration" means to you, what would I need to know? (What questions could I ask?)

7. What difficulties/barriers have you experienced when you have tried to establish better working relationships with the school?

8. After discussing this topic, how would you define parent-school collaboration? (What differences do you see between "collaboration" and "a good working relationship"? Between "collaboration" and "partnership"?)

9. Is there anything else I need to know about you to best understand your responses?

10. **"Vision"** question: What are some ways <u>you</u> would like to see parents and schools collaborating/working together?